

Queer Christianity – Authentic Selves:

**The negotiation of religious, sexual and gendered identities
among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender attendees of
four church congregations in Australia.**

Submitted by

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Statement of Originality

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30th October, 2015.

Acknowledgments

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Whatever knowledge I may have gained in the interactions and time spent with the participants of this study and imparted in the following chapters is in some way fleeting, a minute facet of the whole moving history – the ebb and flow of lives and loves. It is as fleeting as a perfect spider web in the morning dew, or the song of a bird. I remind myself, however, that knowing just a little awakened in me, and hopefully in the reader, a wonder, an awe at the vague momentary imprint of the lives of others, and despite realising how imperfect and transitory the imprint is, I rejoice in both the sharing and the mystery, the knowing and not knowing, and take with me the honour and privilege that I have been able to take part in that moment.

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Wabi Sabi: Nothing lasts
 Nothing is finished
 Nothing is perfect

Preface

The writing of this thesis has been a personal journey. Being both a 'queer' woman and having been involved in a religious group for many years, I was fascinated by the ability of both myself and others to exist within a fundamental religious framework and express an alternate sexuality, yet remain unidentified with this sexuality. Similarly it was quite possible for me (and others) to grasp fragments of the beliefs of this group, live by these fervently, yet concurrently ignore other personally unacceptable elements. I do not believe I was alone in this ability, as I knew many who passionately upheld group activities and witnessed to others, yet lived a double life where taboos were broken and 'the joys of the flesh' partaken.

Whereas sexuality was, above all other private activities, stringently controlled, it was also elevated within the theology and rhetoric as being an essential element of becoming 'one with God'. The heterosexual union was an inseparable component in the experiential embodiment of God's love. Yet, the experience of love which I understood as the highest form of the embodiment of God, could not be bounded or broken down into acceptable or unacceptable, right or wrong, for it simply was. So, years later, ensconced in a stable same-sex relationship but safely divorced from the church, I found myself questioning how others have established and maintained this apparently contradictory marriage of their same-sex attraction and Christianity.

A few years into my dissertation there were times I despaired. I realised that I, a relatively unlearned scholar, had taken upon myself two enormously complex worlds of interpretation and meaning, both hopelessly intertwined, and I question whether I can do justice to the small minority of LGBT Christians with whom I interacted. While the resulting thesis will be judged on its merits, I can safely say my journey has been unforgettable and rewarding

beyond measure. I can also attest that I am a different, hopefully wiser person than the one who began this project, what seems aeons ago.

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Abstract

This thesis is about how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Christians negotiate their religious, sexual and gendered identities. It challenges the assumption that these identities are disparate. Many LGBT Christians, however, do experience internal conflict between their religious world view and their sexual or gendered identity and are confronted with painful self-questioning and struggle. The study investigates the processes through which some LGBT Christians resolve tensions that do occur, and the resulting change to religious practice. The findings are based upon qualitative data from 26 LGBT Christians in the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) congregations and two individuals involved in the Uniting Church in Australia. The study also draws upon participation in services and social occasions in four congregations of the MCC.

Drawing on Taylor (1991); Ahmed (2004), Bourdieu (1990) and queer theory this thesis argues that participants act according to an 'ethic of authenticity' in their desire to express their 'true' sexual, gendered and religious selves. This desire is driven by participants' essentialist understanding of sexuality and gender, and is magnified by the individual's religiosity. In order to live an authentic life, many of the participants enter a process whereby their religious habitus is transformed through relationships, emotions, cognitions, and repetitive ritual practices. A product of this transformation and the desire for authenticity is the enactment of a queer Christian practice. This queer Christian practice, however, also remains somewhat restricted by normative Christian tradition.

Glossary of Terms

Heteronormativity – Heteronormativity refers to the social constraints enforced by institutions, their structures, understandings and practices that privilege heterosexuality by making it appear natural and coherent, culturally desirable and appropriate (Berlant and Warner 1998: 548)

LGBTIQ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer. While my study is particularly interested in the experiences of lesbian, gay male, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Christians, the non-heterosexual community may be referred to as LGBTIQ in the interest of inclusivity (non-heterosexual and gender questioning). I will resist from using the term homosexual (or gay as an umbrella term) because of the ambiguity of both (Steffens and Wagner 2004). However, when referring to specific research the terms used will be dependent upon the study group and terms used.

Non-normative sexuality – refers to any form of sexual activity or choice of object that does not conform to the heterosexual norm.

Queer theory – questions natural assumptions about stable identities, such as sexuality and gender. It questions the ‘natural’ nature of heterosexuality and aims to expose how both gender and sexuality are constructed through performativity – embodied actions of individuals (Plummer 2005; Lovaas, Elia and Yep 2007).

Sexual identity – as distinct from sexual behaviour, refers to the capacity of a person to reflect on their sexual nature and place themselves in socially constructed sexual categories such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer etc. Sexual identities are fluid, as the process of identity

formation is dynamic, changing and shifting, determined by interrelations with other individuals and social groups.

Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches – generally referred to as MCC, a Protestant Christian denomination founded in 1968 by a gay minister, the Rev. Roy Perry (Enroth and Jamison 1974; Warner 2005). The church has grown from the original congregation of 12 men to 250 congregations in over 25 countries, and although totally inclusive, attracts mostly LGBTIQ individuals.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Luke describes the day ‘he lost everything’, the day members of his evangelical church discovered he was same-sex attracted:

We had this massive traumatic break and very emotional, very traumatic, over the top, screaming at people, all this sort of stuff. Like one day I was youth leader of my church, leading a youth group, leading Bible study, and the next day I was just [motions that he was swept aside] gone. Yeah, and for me that was one of the hardest times of my life. I lost everything. I – that was not just my church world; that was my whole world. That was the house that I lived in, all the friends that I had. It was my family; my parents were pastor of the church that I was at. So, to an extent for a few years, my relationship with my family was gone, we didn’t even talk very much. I just lost everything at once. I was 20.

Luke’s life was changed from that moment. His central story, initially one of loss, is a story that is duplicated across Australia and across continents, at times leading to loss of life, more often to loss of faith. The stories in this thesis do not dwell on loss. However, Luke’s story of loss is important because it illustrates the centrality of Christianity to the lives of many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people. Loss has also been recognised as ‘the springboard for religious transformation’ (Ritter and O’Neill 1989: 12) and is the beginning point for the journey of many LGBT Christians.

The thesis examines how committed LGBT Christians understand their lives and their faith, how they rebuild and transform their faith, exerting agency and creating conditions of belief that allow the co-existence of their sexuality and religious world-view. This transformation is effected in ways that, on one hand remain tightly interwoven with Christian normative

thought, expressed in the desire to live authentically loving God, loving Jesus, loving others. On the other, this transformation is intricately connected to a disruption of the Christian normative spaces, a 'queering' of Christian practices that enables LGBT Christians to live the authentic lives they desire, true to their faith and true to their sexuality. Luke, for example, is now a pastor in a newly-formed church, where as an openly gay man he inspires others who are facing similar struggles, preaching a message of inclusivity, but still within the bounds of Christianity.

This thesis is centred on identities – queer identities, Christian identities, authentic identities. Using qualitative methods to investigate and describe how LGBT Christians integrate their faith and sexuality the thesis argues that the LGBT Christians in this study are guided by an 'ethic of authenticity' (Taylor 1991) where they desire to express their 'true' sexual, gendered and religious selves. This desire is magnified by their religiosity which frames this sexuality and gender as 'God given'. This is illustrated beautifully by the words of one transgender participant, 'God has been the driver of my transitioning'.

In order to live authentic lives, true to their original sexual, gendered and religious selves, many LGBT Christians struggle internally due to the religious habitus of their upbringing. This thesis investigates the nature of the internal conflict. It argues that as religious habitus is based upon internalised dispositions, feelings and cognitions, historically naturalised (Bourdieu 1977), change occurs over time through emotion, relationships, cognitions and religious practices. Individuals enter a process whereby they transform religious habitus, exerting agency to break free of structural constraints in the patriarchal and heteronormative spaces and practices of Christianity. The thesis maps the processes that the LGBT Christians go through to integrate their sexuality, gender and religiosity.

The product of the desire to live authentic sexual and religious lives is a form of 'queer Christianity'. Queer practices and relationships unsettle heteronormative order and permeate fixed borders that historically and culturally have contained Christian practice. In enacting these practices and building new relationships, a new religious habitus is created.

This thesis also questions the extent to which spaces and practices are transformed, and in what ways macro normative processes are reproduced or resisted and 'queered', and to what extent Christianity and 'queer' can be reconciled. Is it the case that, as Plummer asserts (2004:148) 'queer fundamentalists have no way of reconciling differences with Christian fundamentalists'? Are there irreconcilable differences between queer and Christianity, or is 'fundamentalist' the operative word? Queer theorists might charge that the LGBT Christians are living according to a 'homonormative' order, where 'hetero' is merely replaced by 'homo', and all restraining conditions remain the same. However, I argue that queering does occur, but is irregular and inconsistent, according to individual contingencies and demographic factors. I conclude that queering only occurs as individual agency is exerted in the discovery and expression of the authentic self and that the institution of Christianity remains relatively untroubled.

In the following paragraphs I introduce the 'problem' of non-normative sexualities, gender and religion – the 'social problem' which my thesis addresses. I briefly state the aims and objectives of the research, and describe the theoretical approach adopted, the research design, and the methodology and methods used to address the problem. This is followed by a short description of research that has been done in this field, identifying gaps in the literature, empirically and theoretically. Based on this I justify this research project and then outline its significance. I next provide a brief sketch of the historical and sociological background of the problem faced by LGBT Christians in Australia today, as illustrated by Luke's story,

followed by a summary of the nature and extent of the contemporary societal and religious tensions between Christianity and same-sex attraction. Finally I outline the structure and argument of the thesis.

Irreconcilable Differences?

At a seminar I explained my research interest to a woman of conservative religious background. I was met with blank incomprehension as she remonstrated that it was in fact not possible, and that the concepts of religious and homosexual were irreconcilable. Their coexistence is scarcely considered by many, both those of religious and non-religious backgrounds and those of the wider non-heterosexual community as even possible (Comstock and Henking 1997; Wilcox 2003; Rycenga 2004; Thumma and Gray 2005; McKinney and Tolbert 2005; Walton 2008).

However, the lived reality is that LGBT individuals are not only born into religious families and communities, where their faith is inextricably connected to their individual and cultural identity, but many choose to turn to faith at some point in their lives (Thumma 1991; Dubowski 2001; Crapo 2005; Drumm 2005; Primiano 2005). Many mainline and conservative religious groups incorporate religious ritual into everyday life, and those born into these families learn what is acceptable and what is not. Most conservative Christian groups believe and teach that homosexuality is a sin and that such sinful desires are temptations of the devil. Such lifestyles will inevitably lead to divine retribution and damnation (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Drumm 2005; Hansen and Lambert 2011). In the USA in the present day as many as 72 per cent of all Christian denominations oppose same-sex sexuality (Rodriguez 2009). Those who find themselves same-sex attracted are often faced with a seemingly insoluble problem.

The tragedy for these individuals is that not only do a large majority of Judeo-Christian churches not accept them as they are, but often the wider LGBTIQ community, understanding the Christian institution to be hostile to non-heteronormative sexuality, shun them as well (Comstock and Henking 1997; Wilcox 2007). The conflicts that arise are deep and often seemingly irreconcilable. While a minority negotiate their religious and sexual identities in ways to find acceptable personal solutions, many remain stymied in their conflicting identities, withdrawing from religion altogether (Thumma 1991; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Morrow 2003; Schnoor 2006; Couch, Mulcare, Pitts, Smith and Mitchell 2008).

According to the Private Lives study carried out in Australia in 2005, of the 72.8 per cent LGBTIQ population that were brought up within a Christian denomination, only 14.8 per cent are currently practising (Couch et al. 2008). Moreover, when compared with the general Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2013), the 5,462 participants in the online survey were over three times more likely to report no religion and three times less likely to be Christian. In addition LGBTIQ individuals are slightly more likely to affiliate with a non-Christian faith (Couch et al. 2008). Qualitative data from this study corroborates this finding, with survey research suggesting that the tensions between same-sex attracted individuals and the tenets of the Christian faith are the catalyst for those people leaving (Mahaffy 1996; Morrow 2003; Hillier, Turner and Mitchell 2004; Couch et al. 2008).

In Australia a small number of quantitative data sets have been collected and analysed, examining such issues as the numbers of LGBTIQ individuals identifying as religious, and to which religions they are affiliated (Couch et al. 2008). Hiller and associates (1998; 2004, 2010) have conducted three national surveys investigating the experiences of same-sex attracted and gender questioning young people. One unexpected outcome from their 2004

survey was the surprisingly high number of young people who identified as religious but who found extreme difficulty in the coexistence of their sexual and religious identities (Hillier, Mitchell and Mulcare 2008).

Many young people report hostility and alienation from families and church communities as well as the wider LGBTIQ community, suffering negative health outcomes (Hillier et al 2004). They report, for example, that LGBTIQ youth who are religiously affiliated feel worse about their lives and are more likely to think about or succeed in self-harm than those not from religious families (Hillier et al 2008). While the majority of LGBT Christians choose to reject either their sexual identity or their religious identity (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000), the present study concentrates on the small percentage that remain faithful to their religion of birth – in this study, Christianity – or those who became converts at some point in their lives.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

This thesis has two key aims. The first is to understand and describe the lived experience of committed LGBT Christians in this study, including their aspirations and struggles, with the desire to identify the driver of their faith, given the hostility toward the LGBT population within Christianity. I explore and map the strategies that both the pastors and members of their congregations employ in negotiating their religious, gendered and sexual identities, describing the nature of the processes that individuals experience from a sociological perspective. I look at cognitive, relational and emotional aspects of individuals' lives. I focus on relationships, ritual and emotion as core meaning making, empowering and possibly vital processes, to facilitate identity transformation. I am also interested in to what degree the individuals in the study succeed in negotiating multiple identities. I extend the present

research on identity negotiation of LGBT Christians to focus on the importance of the moral dimension as a motivating factor in the process of identity negotiation and transformation.

A second aim of this project, in keeping with a central tenet of queer theory that the margins cannot be studied without an interrogation of the centre (Epstein 1994; Namaste 1994), is to explore whether the structural constraints of patriarchy and heteronormativity are produced and reproduced within their congregations and how these structural constraints are experienced, if at all, by the participants. Gender, for example, is a significant factor in understanding the Christian experience due to Christianity's patriarchal foundations (Morrow 2003). I therefore interrogate gender construction in the spaces of the Metropolitan Community Church, and to what extent and in what ways heteronormativity and patriarchy is or is not reproduced.

The research questions are:

- How do active LGBT Christians experience their religious life and what is the fundamental driver of their faith?
- How do LGBT active Christians negotiate their sexual and religious identities, and to what degree are they successful?
- What is the nature of the processes involved in identity negotiation and what does this imply for the nature of religious experience?
- How, if at all, do the participants experience heteronormative and patriarchal relations within the religious institution they attend? Are gender or sexuality, for example, factors in the reproduction of hierarchical distinctions?

Approach and Method

The research is informed by the ‘paradigm of embodiment’ (Csordas 1990) which argues that meaning is constructed not only by what we think, but by what we do and feel. I take the methodological approach that knowledge is found through studying meanings, and that meanings are contextual, emerging and evolving (Creswell 2103). The research questions are focused on the micro level, the detailed subjective meanings that the participants attribute to their actions and social position. Furthermore, as the study is interested in social processes and gaining a nuanced understanding of how participants negotiated meaning, I employ qualitative methods and analysis to understand the culture within which the participants create meaning.

I conducted 28 in-depth interviews, four with key informants (the pastors of each congregation) as well as with congregants – male and female – in each of four congregations of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) in Sydney and Melbourne, a LGBT affirming Christian denomination. I conducted two interviews with members of the Uniting Church. Additionally, as I am interested in religious practice, which is by definition a relational, embodied and shared experience, I participated in services and other activities. Through this I was able to gain an appreciation of the group dynamics and hierarchy, the symbols and rituals either shared or unique to each congregation, and external emotional and bodily responses to these rituals (Csordas 1994; Wilcox 2003).

Justification and Significance of the Study

Until recently there has been a scarcity of social or academic analysis of the issue of LGBT Christians (Davidson 2011). Since the 1990s, however, perhaps in tandem with the rise of

LGBTIQ identity politics and the ensuing religious hostility towards same-sex attraction, interdisciplinary academic interest has gained momentum, predominantly centred on the USA and Britain (Comstock and Henking 1997; Thumma and Gray 2005). The focus of this research has been on rejection and internal conflict management mechanisms utilised by gay male Christians (Yip 2005; Yip 1997a; Yip 1999; Thumma 1991; Schnoor 2006; Wolkomir 2006). More recently the experience of lesbians within Christianity and other religious and spiritual groups has been the focus of inter-disciplinary studies (Comstock and Henking 1997; Yip 1997b; Wilcox 2002, 2003; Drumm 2005; Browne, Munt and Yip 2010).

Qualitative sociological research conducted on the intersection of same-sex attraction and religion in Australia is sparse. Kirkman (2001) in New Zealand seeks an understanding of the intersection of sexual and religious identities of lesbians from a sociological point of view. Gahan and Jones (2013) open the conversation with their diverse collection of contributions exploring the intersection of religion and spirituality in Australia. In addition, a recent dissertation by Dickson (2012) investigates issues of identity and belonging amongst active LGBT Christians in Sydney, Australia. The present study adds to these small data sets and investigates and analyses the lived experience of LGBT Christians in four congregations in Melbourne and Sydney.

The study also contributes to a greater understanding of the unique experience of individual LGBT Christians. According to Yip (2010: 45), 'the importance of the documentation of the lived experiences cannot be underestimated ... for while theology often grapples with what ought to be, empirical work focuses on what is, amidst the messiness of life as lived'. The lived experience of religion is complex, individualised and unique. Each individual provides insights into the nature of the religious experience.

I also contribute to the theoretical understanding of the lived religious experience, and the nature of transformation of identity. This study is innovative as it links Taylor's (1991) concept of the 'ethic of authenticity' to the experience of LGBT Christians, and analyses the tensions between striving for the essential 'real' authentic self and the queer self. Queer theory has only recently been applied to analyse the lives of religious individuals, as there has been an assumption that the two were incompatible (Plummer 1995). I question the extent of the queering of religion and expose the tensions between queer theory and the expressed desire of the participants to strive for authenticity. Incorporating Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of habitus, Ahmed's (2004) theories of emotion and Riis and Woodhead's (2010) theory of religious experience as emotional and experiential, I build a detailed analysis of the complex connections between the seemingly contradictory queer transformation of self and religion, including the dynamics that underlie transformation of habitus.

Finally, the project is significant as it addresses the lack of mainstream acceptance of the legitimacy of active LGBT Christians. Their legitimacy is contested by the general LGBTIQ community, the Christian community or the community at large (Comstock and Henking 1997; Rycenga 2004; McKinney and Tolbert 2005; Thumma and Gray 2005; Wilcox 2007), leading to negative health outcomes (Hillier 2008). While the last decade has seen 'a paradigm shift' (Rodriguez 2009: 8) in the recognition of same-sex attracted individuals as legitimate religious and spiritual beings, the process is far from complete. Without developing academic and social discourse around the intersection of sexuality and religion, in this case more specifically same-sex attracted individuals and Christianity, the issue remains relatively unexamined and unaddressed. According to Tosh (2001), only with this step of naming can legitimacy be gained and the history of erasure repaired. This study gives voice to this previously unrecognised social group.

The church still retains a powerful influence over what Foucault identifies as discourse, and Bourdieu terms ‘doxa’ – that is the dominant worldview (Rey 2008: Yip 2010: 36). It is the last bastion of resistance to sexual diversity, where secular institutions show evidence of progressive change (Wilcox 2007). Thus the issue of same-sex marriage, for example, is still deeply divisive within the community at large, and is an illustration of how the dominant Western worldview has been guided by Christian discourse (Yip 2010). Even if same-sex marriage is brought into law, as in many countries, the underlying tensions will not disappear (Holpuch 2015). One role of sociology is to expose the historically and culturally constructed nature of discourse, a discourse that supports an often unjust social order (Rey 2008).

Background

Same-sex attraction and Christianity

To understand the experience of the LGBT Christians in this study, I provide a brief sketch of the origins and nature of the conflict between non-normative sexuality and religion, concentrating on Christianity in contemporary Western society. In contemporary Western society the defining characteristics of opposition to homosexuality, which refers in most historical research to male homosexuality, are that it is ‘immoral and unnatural’ (Boswell 2009: 324). This charge is grounded predominantly in religious statutes (Baunach 2011; Whitehead 2010) – in this case Christian writings and beliefs. However, the argument that homosexuality is immoral is a relatively recent one within Christianity. According to Boswell (1979), early Christians did not hold homosexuality to be morally unacceptable, although for practical reasons they did hold a certain hostility to non-procreative sexuality. It is generally accepted, however, that there was a profound change of attitudes to

homosexuality around the late 12th to 13th centuries (Boswell 1979). European society that was previously tolerant to not only homosexuals but also Jews, Muslims, witches and women became, in a short space of time, rigid, intolerant and punitive. Jews were executed in the street if they questioned the Christian faith, women were expelled from universities in which they had previously been enrolled and laws were passed in many European countries that outlawed homosexuality and prescribed the death penalty (Boswell 1979).

According to Boswell, this popular reaction influenced the Christian church. Homosexuality, which had previously been accepted or at worst tolerated as comparable to heterosexual fornication, began to be portrayed as one of the most despicable sins. Boswell argues that the repression and hatred of homosexuality came about due to 'popular misunderstandings of the Christian theology, not from faithful implementation of Church policy' (1992: 96).

Bailey (in Bullough 1976: 353) explains that the church was complicit in the process of the demonisation of homosexuality, stating that 'the Christian church cannot be entirely exonerated from all responsibility for hostility toward homosexuality'. Bailey's (1955) book, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, served as a good starting-point for biblical scholars. A large body of research has ensued in which scholars have supported his claims – for example, that the biblical story of Sodom and other biblical verses have been wrongly interpreted, mistranslated and often taken out of context (Bullough 1976). For the purposes of this summary it is not necessary to specify each biblical reference; suffice to say, according to Bailey and Boswell, among others, that 'the objections to homosexuality are not biblical, they are not consistent and not part of Jesus' teachings, nor are they fundamentally Christian' (Boswell 1979: 5).

While many theologians have refuted the veracity of the biblical references to homosexuality countering the immoral argument (Spong 1991; Heyward 1999; Edser 2012), a deeply engrained attitude that pervades not only Christian but wider contemporary society is that homosexuality is unnatural (Iyer 2014). The unnaturalness of homosexuality is based upon the argument that the dichotomous masculine and feminine characteristics are compatible and biblically ordained or naturally occurring. For Christians, natural relations are between a man and a woman (The Bible, Revised Standard Version [RSV], Corinthians 1: 27), and God created Adam and Eve to populate the world (The Bible, RSV, Genesis 1: 28). This source of tension between same-sex attraction and the Christian worldview is deeply engrained and has a powerful impact upon many of the LGBT Christians faced with conflict. In order to understand this tension, I turn to philosophical and sociological thinking, in tandem with Christian thought.

Same-sex attraction and society

Sociological theory is helpful in understanding the strange transformation described above from neutrality to hostility. Foucault (1990), for example, investigates how humans decide which variations from the norm are desirable and which are sinister or threatening. His landmark study of sexuality, *The History of Sexuality* (1976/1990), sheds light upon the forces of power at work since the 17th century. Foucault draws attention to the medicalisation of sexuality and the conceptualisation of homosexuality as a sin created through confession. In this historical narrative, Foucault argues that the modern homosexual gained an identity through medicalisation, creating a marginal and illegitimate identity. Homosexuality became a condition that could be treated (Foucault 1990). Confession, in addition, contributed to the transformation of thoughts and feelings and sexual acts into a sinful 'homosexual identity'. This enabled the church to exercise its power over the populace (Foucault 1990). Discourse

such as this became embedded in habitus – dispositions that guided actions and ways of living (Bourdieu 1977).

Furthermore, according to Foucauldian scholar Jordan (1997), in the early church sexual and other sins were relatively undifferentiated. From medieval times, however, some sexual acts gained greater status (Armour 2010). In his book, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, Jordan traces the emergence of ‘sodomy’ as a particularly ‘problematic’ sin which over time is stabilised as an irredeemable identity, ‘the sodomite’ (Jordan 1997: 57, 123, 162). Armour perceives the ‘invention’ of sodomy as a pivotal point in the emergence of ‘*scientia sexualis*’ (Armour 2010: 116). The *scientia sexualis* cemented, at least the male homosexual’s identity as an aberration (Armour 2010). Homosexuality came to be portrayed as an unnatural, abnormal condition, and was cemented in discourse and habitus.

Thus, the person defined by his/her sexuality came into being (Foucault 1990; Jagose 1996). With the ‘birth’ of the homosexual identity, and the increasing individualisation of late modernity, in particular since the 1960s, came the political move from the private to the public sphere, where previously marginal identities asserted their claim to legitimacy. For the LGBT community the ‘coming out discourse’ became paramount (Wilcox 2010: 251; Baunach 2011: 349).

Linked to this emerging and increasingly delineated homosexual identity are power relations at work between the dominant heteronormative discourse and the increasing threat of non-normative sexuality. These relations hold the key to tensions that exist today. According to Connell and Dowsett (1992: 2), sexuality is ‘inherently a domain of power relations’ between, for example, women and men or heterosexuals and LGBTIQ individuals. Power relations are particularly relevant in Christianity, a predominantly patriarchal and heterosexist

institution. The Christian institution has not been exempt from being an instrument of control throughout the modern era (Comstock 1993).

Christianity today

While traditional religious institutions, in particular Christian mainstream churches, have weakened as predicted by secularisation theory, there has been a two-pronged growth in religious activity (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Bouma 2006). First, there has been a growth in non-mainstream religions outside of Christianity, such as immigrant Islamic communities, as well as a diversification in liberal Christian denominations. Second, in response to uncertainty resulting from the fragmentation and individualisation of contemporary social and religious realities, there has been a growth in fundamentalism, which has become more dominant and powerful worldwide (Bouma 2006).

Fundamentalist Christianity in Australia has brought religious values back into the public political sphere, albeit in a limited way, concentrating on shaping domestic policy on family values (Bouma 2006). This is partly as a result of the increasing marginalisation of the church, and partly as a consequence of its revitalisation. While traditional fundamentalist and conservative evangelicals concentrate on ‘conversion of the human heart’ (van Geest 2007: 202), the last 40 years have seen a change as the Christian right has placed moral issues onto the political agenda. The voicing of moral positions on issues such as abortion, women’s rights and homosexuality are indicative of this and have had the effect of polarising believers into orthodox, fundamental and liberal or progressive positions, both *within* and *between* faith groups (van Geest 2007: 202).

Symptoms of the politicisation of a Christian right moral agenda are demonstrated, for example, in the polarised and contested arguments for and against homosexuality and same-

sex marriage worldwide. The recent call to allow legal refusal of service to LGBT individuals in Northern Ireland is a reminder of the power of Christian morality at work (Strudwick 2014). In the USA the recent battle between the state of Alabama and the US Supreme Court is also an example of this polarisation, with the powerful state Christian right moral agenda at odds with the federal ruling in support of equality (Holpuch 2015). In Australia the conservative Howard government amended the Marriage Act of 1961 to define marriage as ‘the union of a man and a woman, to the exclusion of all others’ (Marriage Amendment Act 2004) and this remains unchallenged at this time, bolstered by the belief that not only the institution of marriage but the very fabric of society is under threat (Gillies 2003).

In the US and to a lesser degree in Australia white Protestant conservatives representing libertarian individualism have been able to assert cultural dominance (Adam 2003: 271). This is manifested in ‘virtuous crusades’ which exert power to define what is acceptable and what is deviant, promoting destruction of ‘evil people, wicked institutions and practices’ (Adam 2003: 263). Evangelical Protestants clearly place same-sex attracted individuals in the camp of the wicked. Homosexuality has been successfully framed within the religious field as a symptom of ‘moral decline’.

Thesis Argument and Structure

It is within this context that my study is situated. The assumptions and discourses surrounding same-sex attraction influence LGBT individuals who are brought up within contemporary Western culture, with its roots deeply imbued with Christian thinking. This study gives voice to a small group of LGBT active Christians and tells their story in their words. It demonstrates how this backdrop influences how same-sex attracted Christians

negotiate and experience their religious identity. The thesis begins with an overview of the relevant empirical research and theoretical frameworks, followed by the methodology used to investigate and describe the research. This is followed by five findings chapters then a discussion and conclusion chapter to situate the findings in the broader context.

Chapter 2 reviews qualitative and ethnographic studies that specifically examine the intersection of Christianity and same-sex attraction, with particular attention to studies that centre on the processes of resolution of conflict often experienced by LGBT Christians. I focus on the debates that exist within the growing body of research, specifically the extent to which this process is dependent upon individual agency, embodied practices or group relations. The second area of interest is the importance of relationships and emotion for the religious experience, as opposed to the dominance of cognitive factors. Connected to both the above debates is the importance of ritual and practices to personal transformation and religious satisfaction.

I also outline literature that addresses diversity within the experience of LGBT Christians within the patriarchal environment of Christianity. This is integral to an understanding of the implications of queer theory and to what degree and in what manner queer is lived. Literature suggests that practices are ‘queered’, yet empirical data indicates that the lived experiences of LGBT Christians expound a contradictory essentialist understanding of sexuality and gender.

Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical toolkit employed to describe and analyse the experience of the LGBT Christians, and the institution of Christianity. First I draw upon the work of Taylor (1991), specifically his concept of the ‘ethic of authenticity’. Using this I demonstrate the moral dimension of the LGBT Christians lives as they strive to express their ‘true’ sexuality,

and gender within the context of their religiosity. The product of this desire is a 'queer' Christianity.

From queer theory I utilise the concepts of heteronormativity and performativity to describe how Christian normative boundaries are subverted through queer Christian practices. I also employ the concept of liminality in ritual to analyse the transformation of space and identities. In addition I outline Ahmed's (2004) exposition of the role of human emotion in human interactions and in power relations is useful in analysing this process of individual change. I finally discuss the theory of the religious experience employing models of religion as fundamentally emotional and experiential as understood by Riis and Woodhead (2010). Integral to this understanding of religion is Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice and concept of habitus. Individuals embody a 'religious worldview' around which they create meaning. This is often resistant to change.

Chapter 4 introduces the methodological and empirical approach. I outline the constructionist methodological paradigm and the qualitative research strategies and design, justifying the use of in-depth interviews in conjunction with participant observation as methods of data collection. I also outline the process of analysis, based upon Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory, and discuss the implications of the methods and ethical considerations. In arguing positionality and embodiment as essential to the production of knowledge, I dedicate the second section of this chapter to a detailed discussion of my experiences in the field, positioning myself and viewing my experiences under the microscope. This is in recognition of the researcher's role as being critical in the production of knowledge.

Chapters 5 to 9 describe and discuss the findings. Chapter 5 sets the stage for the following findings chapters with comparative descriptions of each MCC I visited, in terms of institutional structure, its space, its people, and its practices. This is based upon my own experiences, the interviews and supporting literature. In this chapter I introduce the MCC from the point of view of the participants as a safe and inclusive space. For example, practices such as communion are common to all congregations and are pivotal to the queering and transforming of these spaces. I identify differences between each congregation and introduce the reader to the tensions that exist to a greater or lesser degree in each congregation. Tensions such as those between the practices that queer Christianity and actions and attitudes based upon Christian patriarchal normative are described briefly. This chapter provides the backdrop for the data analysis in the following chapters.

Chapter 6 describes the desire of the participants to live an authentic life and what this entailed. I outline ways in which the LGBT Christians understand their sexuality and to some extent their gender as essential, as a gift from God, and how they live their lives in pursuit of the goal of authenticity. The participants live according to an ‘ethic of authenticity’ that propels them to live and act in certain ways. The performative act of coming out, for example, is central to the attainment of authenticity, as is living a life of goodness according to the example of Jesus.

The following two findings chapters, 7 and 8, focus on transformation of identities – how authentic identities are achieved, and how queer identities and Christian identities deal with conflict and reach a state of integration. Chapter 7 maps a five-stage process that individuals engage in when faced with tension between their same-sex attraction and religious worldview. I based my mapping of this process on a similar study done by Levy and Reeves (2011) and critique this using the empirical data gained through semi-structured interviews to

gain a more nuanced understanding of this process. I argue that a Christian habitus and subsequent horizons of significance based upon this imparts a loving God that enables individuals to either easily resolve doctrinal issues or disregard these.

Chapter 8 describes and analyses catalytic moments often experienced by the LGBT Christians that enable and empower them to move forward to begin a process of resolution. I argue that the catalytic moment for LGBT Christians is driven by emotion in relational experiences, whether informed by cognitive factors or not. This is followed by a description of the next stage of positive rebuilding of frameworks of being. I concentrate upon the embodied and ritual practices that aid the realisation of peaceful integration of sexual and gendered identity and religious world view. These practices can also be described as queering practices, practices that unsettle heteronormative constraints. This reinforces the argument that lived religion is an emotional, embodied relational experience. I concentrate on the role of MCC in this as an enabling space.

Chapter 9 analyses the tension between queerness and authenticity – two concepts that at first glance appear diametrically opposed. Striving to live an authentic life is aided by the queering of practices. I describe how the two work together in tension, at times in tandem, in the relational dynamics and practices of the LGBT Christians in this study. This tension is exposed by the gender dynamic of the MCC congregations and attitudes to bisexuality and responses to transgendered Christians. While MCC queers Christianity in terms of resisting heteronormative constraints, the patriarchal institution of Christianity as expressed in MCC remains untroubled. I conclude there is a profound resistance to queering in everyday life.

Chapter 10 draws together the central arguments of the thesis, discussing the key findings in relation to other relevant research. The LGBT Christians desire to live according to an ethic

of authenticity, true to their sexual, gendered and religious selves. I analyse the nature of the conflict, its resolution and the implications for the sociology of religion. I conclude that the transformation of identities is effected through emotional and relational factors, through meaningful religious practices that are often, but not always, underpinned by cognitive factors.

Chapter 2: Literature: Gaps, Debates and Tensions

Introduction

Empirical data examining the intersection of sexuality and religious affiliation is patchy. The last decades have seen a greater recognition of the unique position and dilemma of LGBT religious individuals. Interest has grown, mostly centred on the USA and United Kingdom, a large proportion of which is situated within a narrow demographic – white, middle class Christians. The studies have mainly concentrated on conflict – the unique conflict of identities as individuals struggle to exist as same-sex attracted and with a religious affiliation. Research concentrates on strategies that LGBT religious individuals employ to resolve these conflicts. This chapter argues that internal identity conflicts that LGBT religious individuals experience are best understood and analysed using sociological theories that focus on relationships, emotions and practices. Cognitions, while important, are inextricably linked to the relational factors.

The analysis of how individuals remain faithful to the religion of their upbringing, given the level of hostility to same-sex attraction, underpins my work. This thesis responds to the debates and tensions within the literature, in particular debates surrounding the relative importance of cognitions, relationships, emotions and religious practices to personal transformation. How important is the group to individual transformation? How important are cognitive responses to the conflict? How important are ritual and performative practices? In this chapter I argue that the group and religious practices are critical to transformation of religious world view.

I first outline relevant areas of research, and sites and methodologies utilised by these studies and describe the contribution of early research projects. I then discuss the role of theology, of the individual and group and finally the role of religious practice. The chapter finally looks at diversity under the LGBT banner – the understudied experience of women in the patriarchal institution of Christianity, and the experience of bisexual and transgendered individuals.

Areas of Relevant Research

The literature relevant to this study is grouped around three major themes (Comstock and Henking 1997). The first predominantly concentrates on negotiations of identity within the gay male and more recently the lesbian Judeo-Christian community. This research identifies coping mechanisms the respondents utilise to deal with identity conflicts and rejection from organised religious groups (Enroth and Jamieson 1974; Bauer 1976; Gorman 1980; Thumma 1991; Yip 1997a, Yip 1999; Primiano 2005; Savastano 2005; Gray and Thumma 2005; Schnoor 2006 and Wolkomir 2006 for studies concentrating on gay male experience, and Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Kirkman 2001; Yip 2005; Cadge 2005; Drumm 2005; Lukenbill 2005; Wilcox, 2002, 2003, 2007; O'Brien 2007 and Levy and Reeves 2011 for studies that either concentrate on or includes the lesbian experience).

Added to this is research that focuses on adherence to liberal organised religions, such as Quakerism, Paganism and non-Western religions, as well as research on gay, lesbian and queer spirituality that has emerged, often outside the narrow confines of organised religion (Yip 2005; Gorrell 2005; Wilcox 2009; Munt 2010; Yip and Khalid 2010; Yip and Smith 2010; Browne 2010; Dinnie and Browne 2011).

A second, far smaller, body of literature identifies the importance of religion culturally and personally to lesbian and gay individuals in general within the USA or Europe (Thumma 1991; Dubowski 2001; Drumm 2005; Primiano 2005; Crapo 2005). This literature identifies the religious experience as unable to be divorced from the cultural. Connected to this, the third body of literature concentrates on the practice of religion in everyday life and the value of religious symbolism for creating meaning. Included in this is literature that focuses on the ‘queering’ of religious practice, in particular the transgression of heteronormative boundaries within religious symbolism and ritual (Neitz 2000, 2005; Moon 2005a, 2005b; Abes and Kasch 2007; Browne 2010).

I also review literature dealing with the gendered experience of same-sex attracted Christians and those few studies that address the distinct experience of bisexual and transgendered Christians. I am particularly interested in the response to ambiguity within Christianity as an interrogation of the normative patriarchal field of Christianity (Stryker 2008; Bernhardt-House 2010; Daniels 2010). I draw from all of these groups of literature to investigate the processes of worldview transformation that are necessary to understand the lived experience of the LGBT Christians in my study.

Methodology and Sites of Research

Qualitative research predominates as it is more suited to the study of the complex and prolonged processes of conflict resolution (Rodriguez 2009). The majority of researchers analyse strategies that respondents employ to integrate seemingly conflicting identities (Yip 1997a; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Morrow 2003; Drumm 2005; Rodriguez 2009; Levy and Reeves 2011). To do this, most studies have an ethnographic element in order to understand these processes, and are carried out in sites of religious worship. The

overwhelming majority of research has been done within gay-affirming religious spaces, as these enable the research of such processes. Gay-affirming or gay-positive churches, as Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) word it, are churches that directly minster to the spiritual needs of LGBT Christians. This is opposed to gay-friendly, mainline churches that welcome LGBT individuals (such as the Uniting Church).

Initial interest in the intersection of sexuality and religiosity was centred upon the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) (Comstock and Henking 1997) and this remains a central focus of research. MCC was founded in 1968 by the excommunicated Presbyterian gay minister Troy Perry (Enroth and Jamieson 1974; Comstock and Henking 1997; Wilcox 2003). It began as a meeting of twelve people in a room in Los Angeles who met to celebrate their religious commitment to Jesus¹.

Early Studies

As early as 1974 Enroth and Jamieson (1974) examined the MCC over a period of a year. The two heterosexual sociology students openly admitted their inability to be objective in their study, and stated that rather than a study of religion, it was one of homosexuality. In their concluding chapter they remark that the MCC is merely ‘an extension of gay-lifestyle clothed in religiosity’ (Enroth and Jamieson 1974: 106) and that the experience and theology of those who attended was a way of overcoming stigma caused by a ‘deviant lifestyle’, commenting that ‘Gay theology is, at best, an apology’ (Enroth and Jamieson 1974: 60). It did little to examine the religious experience of the mostly gay men, or to recognise it as legitimate, concentrating on the homosexual phenomenon from an outsider’s point of view. In fact, according to Rodriguez (2009) their study was not just homophobic by today’s

¹ The Metropolitan Community Church is described in detail in Chapter 5.

standards, but even at the time it was written. According to him, their criticism of the MCC as just another place to 'cruise' still carries weight today.

Bauer's (1976) study of the Denver MCC congregation, despite its similarly problematic treatment of the homosexual male in stereotypical ways (obsessed with sex or the delicate effeminate), was the first to address the issue of conflict using the cognitive dissonance model to deal with the apparent incompatibility of Christian beliefs and a homosexual lifestyle. Cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) occurs when two inconsistent thoughts or beliefs or inconsistent beliefs and behaviour are held by an individual simultaneously, leading a person to adjust their cognitions to resolve their discomfort or anxiety (Rodriguez 2009). Bauer regards the MCC as plausible in that it serves the socio-religious needs of the gay men in the study. By, as he termed it, 'adding new cognitive elements' (Bauer 1976: 126), such as focusing on the love of Jesus for all men [sic], the MCC helped the men resolve their conflict and anxiety caused by cognitive dissonance.

According to Wilcox (2003), both these early studies reveal more about the culture at the time than LGBT religiosity. Despite their shortcomings, these two inaugural studies were important in that they began to address the issue of the conflict experienced by most LGBT Christian individuals as they began their journey of integrating the religious, gendered and sexual identities.

The Role of Theology

The role of theology in the process of identity integration has been the focus of a large body of literature. The first serious in-depth comparative study of three gay affirming religious communities (MCC, Catholic Dignity and Jewish LGBT congregations), a dissertation by

Gorman (1980), 'A New Light on Zion', frames the conflict as informed by socio-cultural processes and aided by a revised theology. For example, the experience of 'coming out' as gay men, together with the oppression suffered as gay men, is pivotal to their spiritual revival and spiritual experience. Their suffering is understood theologically as an aid to understanding and identifying with Jesus (Gorman 1997), a finding supported consistently by other studies.

Warner's (2005) analysis of the MCC church points to a similar process of conflict resolution bolstered by the essentialist assertion that 'God made me this way', in addition to a theological belief in the preordination of sexuality. This conservative theology, combined with a Pentecostal element that God is alive and working actively in the lives of believers, he asserts, allows adherents to develop a belief in their essential goodness. The rapid growth of the MCC is testament to this (Warner 2005). The belief and emphasis on essentialism is a finding common to most ethnographic, psychological and sociological studies (Bauer 1976; Thumma 1991; Yip 1999; 1997a; 1997b; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Lukenbill 2005; Primiano 2005; Wolkomir 2006; Gross and Yip 2010).

According to Warner, (2005: 187), 'if there is one article of faith that unites Christian gay men [sic] today it is that their sexual orientation is indelible'. It is interesting to note the emphasis on gay men. In this respect there remains a dearth of research investigating the experience of women, who are more likely than men to report that their sexuality is a choice, more in line with the constructionist sociological argument (Warner 2005). However Wilcox (2002: 504) in her study on lesbians within the MCC finds the greater majority strongly assert their innate sexuality, saying, 'Essentialism reigns supreme'.

In addition to the emphasis on the essentialist ‘God made me gay’ argument, gay theology emphasises the message of the Bible which is ‘transforming pain and resurrection’ (Comstock 1993: 9). By identifying with the struggle of the chosen people in Exodus, and the life and death of Jesus, LGBT Christians can construct an ethic by which to live (Comstock 1993) and be empowered, feeling chosen by God to carry this message (Yip 2005). Yip (2005: 49) refers to this as ‘theological capital’, available for LGBT Christians as a resource in affirming their sexuality. It is upon such a theological basis that the concept of the ‘authentic’ Christian is based.

Theological scholars have systematised alternative theologies: feminist (Christ 2004), gay (Comstock 1993), and their more radical counterparts, thealogy (Raphael 1999) and queer theology (Loughlin 2007). Researchers have collected both qualitative and quantitative empirical data that identifies an active theological reappraisal of predominantly heteronormative and patriarchal religious texts by LGBT Christians (and more recently Moslems) in the UK, France and the USA (Thumma 1991; Comstock and Gray 1997; Yip 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Yip et al 2010; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Wilcox 2002, 2003, 2009; Wolkomir 2006).

According to Yip (Yip 2005: 51) gay and queer theologies ‘queered religious texts’, critiquing and destabilising accepted traditional interpretations, by uncovering their cultural and social context. Frontain (1997: 2) describes this as the ‘transgressive impulse’, the desire to challenge traditionally accepted Biblical understandings. The three major strategies are the critique of Bible texts, the questioning of the authority of those who previously interpreted the texts and a re-interpretation of specific religious texts. The role of the re-interpreted biblical readings and philosophically reappraised theologies in identity formation should not be under-estimated. However, the cognitive role of biblical interpretation and theology can

be understood as only part of a dialectic process of identity transformation, embodied and emotionally imbued through relationships, socialisation and habitus, symbolism and ritual practices (Rey 2008). According to the queer theologian Danielson-Morales (2014), ‘there is no theology outside the body; there is no theology outside relationships’.

The Role of the Individual and the Role of the Community

The group is important to religious individuals. For LGBT Christians this is possibly more critical. There is debate however about the relative importance of the community as opposed to individual agency. Gorman (1980) was probably the first to identify the importance of the community, and of social activities in addition to a revised understanding of the Bible and a reinterpreted historical contextualising of theology in aiding the resolution of conflict. He comes to the conclusion that the religious group itself plays an important role in developing a proud identity as gay, as well as providing a social support structure. This is regardless of denomination (Wilcox 2003). Gorman is interested in ritual, rites of passage and codes of conduct and was also the first to note how LGBT religious adherents claim back their faith, postulating that for gay men ‘religion had come out of the closet’ (Gorman 1997: 331). Through claiming back ‘my religion’ (Wilcox 2003: 13) without apology, they turned the rhetoric from, ‘we should be here because ..., to we are here, get used to it’ (Yip 2010: 43).

Thumma (1991) analyses identity conflict among a small group of gay male conservative Christians and in his much-cited paper focuses on the use of theological and biblical reinterpretation, as well as socialisation within the group. Thumma focusses on *individual* agency to arrive at *negotiated* interpretations which are subsequently employed as tools to accommodate a Christian identity with sexual identity. He recognises this as a socialisation process by which the Evangelical religious identity is reconstructed and internalised to

encompass sexual identity. Thumma incorporates theology, the community and relationships with individual agency, yet places great emphasis on the role of the individual.

Others studies also concentrate on coping strategies as *individual*. In a 1993 dissertation by Primiano, whose study of Catholic Dignity² members, concludes, as did Gorman and Thumma, that individual solutions, although related to the church institution, *were not dependent upon them*. Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remein, and Williams's (1994) findings offer support for this process in their quantitative psychological study of both non-church going and church going Dignity members. Both groups report similar findings in that the process of religious and sexual identity integration, although aided by the community, is initially a product of individual agency.

Yip (1995; 1997a; 1997b; 1999; Gross and Yip 2010) in his various studies of mostly gay male Catholics in Britain (and one comparative study which included French Catholics) finds that the majority of his respondents have little difficulty in casting aside what they understand as out-dated theology and misleading biblical references to homosexuality as a sin. In what he conceptualises as a stigma management strategy, the respondents demonstrate their individual agency to rise above the Churches imposition of deviancy upon them (Yip 1997b). Walton (2010) frames the blending of sexual and religious identities as facilitated by 'acts of resistance against ...moral and political regimes'. He understands this process as both an individual and social process.

Wilcox (2002) in a field study of two MCC congregations agrees that the community supports an already active individual process of identity integration. Some lesbians in her study, for example, from Catholic backgrounds experience no conflict, easily concentrating

² Catholic dignity is an organisation formed by LGBT Catholics

on their view of God as a 'God of Love', rather than one that denounces their 'essential sexuality' (Wilcox 2003: 51). These individuals had chosen to accept their own individual understanding of their faith before meeting the MCC congregation. Wilcox concludes that many of the MCC adherents find their specific congregations as a last step in a long, mainly individual process of resolving tension between their religious and LGBT identity (Wilcox 2003). This conclusion is supported by Bates (2005) in her study of African American lesbians and Kirkman's (2001) research on Christian lesbians in New Zealand. The respondents emphasise their individual spirituality within gay-affirming congregations.

In addition, Wilcox (2002, 2003, and 2009) argues that LGBT Christians are forced into finding individual solutions as a necessity, without which they may 'remain in doctrinally ordained closets' (2002: 511). She asserts that conservative LGBT Christians are more likely to resort to such individual selective sifting of beliefs than their heterosexual counterparts (Wilcox 2002), although this is a feature of contemporary religiosity per se (Roof: 1999; Bouma 2006). Wilcox (2002: 497) emphasises the positive role of individualism in the lives of the LGBT Christians in her study, and does not understand to be the 'diametric opposite' of community based religious worship.

Other research proposes that the group is critical to resolution of conflict for LGBT Christians. Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000), for example, report that the MCC New York congregation they studied plays an integral part in the identity negotiation process. Their quantitative study, with an integrated qualitative element, indicates that for the respondents, communication about their concerns and reading relevant literature is crucial to the level of integration. Their study falls short of identifying in detail what the process of identity integration is and the authors recognise this as a gap in need of further research. Thus, they say, it is difficult to argue conclusively that the process is primarily a group process.

Rappaport (2000: 7), however, in his analysis of transformation, clearly and succinctly articulates that ‘it is possible to turn tales of terror to tales of joy, but it is much easier to do this, perhaps even necessary to sustain this, as part of a community, rather than a lone individual’.

His stance is supported by Dickson (2013), in his study of three denominations in Sydney, Australia. He places emphasis, for example, on ‘belonging’ as critical to resolution of conflict and continued adherence to faith amongst LGBT Christians. Belonging for Dickson, leads to experiences of transcendence, which enable and empower LGBT Christians to legitimate their own sexuality or gender identities. He proposes that relationships and practices within the group are critical to resolution of internal conflict. I finally review literature that concentrates on and emphasises the importance of the embodied expression of religious belief, the (mostly) communal doing of religious practice.

Role of Religious Practice

The role of religious practice and ritual is a theme that re-occurs in the sociological accounts of religion as vital to the religious experience (Durkheim 1957; Bourdieu 1977; Csordas 1994). Csordas (1994), for example, in his detailed study of charismatic healing among Catholics in the USA recognises the embodied ritual experience as powerfully transformative. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, he describes ritual as an ‘operative and resonating process of both beliefs and bodily emotions as dispositions in a collective embodied habitus’ (Rey 2005: 113). He focuses on the internalised and performative function of ritual within the shared habitus which is both the generator of specific ritual behaviours and the matrix of perception that makes meaning (Rey 2005).

Much of the literature dedicated to understanding the intersection of LGBT religiosity identifies the effectiveness of both ritual and symbolism as central to the transformative processes of the gay affirming churches (Wilcox 2003; Primiano 2005; Warner 2005). Rodriguez and Ouellette, (2000), for example, recognise liturgy in the MCC as an element that helps congregants legitimise their religious beliefs. Brumbaugh (2007) concentrates solely on ritual practices as vital to the dynamic process of identity congruence.

Rappaport (2000), Wilcox (2003), Lukenbill (2005) and Brumbaugh (2007) use discourse theory in their analyses of how MCC services (symbolism, ritual and music) contribute to participants' identity resolution. Wilcox draws on Lincoln's (1989) understanding of discourse as central to the construction of and maintenance of social order, which legitimises or de-legitimises through the mediums of myth and ritual (Wilcox 2003). She finds Bourdieu's (1990) understanding of effective symbols as 'able to conserve or subvert the social order' (Wilcox 2003: 131) as useful to understand the effectiveness of the safe spaces of worship in resolving identity conflict and anxiety. Discourse could be de- and re-constructed through worship in safe-spaces.

Shallenberger's (1998) understanding of the integration of religious and sexual identity as a 'spiritual journey' (Rodriguez 2009: 18) adds another dimension to identity integration, allowing for greater complexity. The journey, which encompasses repeated religious practices, rather than just the destination, is given value and meaning. Three practices feature in the contribution to conflict resolution of LGBT Christians, in particular within the MCC: communion; music and symbolism, and coming out as a sacrament. All of these are understood as critical to the (re) creation of discourse and the transformation of religious habitus.

Practice - communion

Wilcox (2003) states that of all the religious practices in the MCC services, the most remarkable and central is the ritual of communion. Communion is offered at all services regardless of the congregation, to all participants as they wish, whether members or not. It is identified as an essential sacrament and whereas the order and content of the service may differ, as may the form of communion, it is always offered (Lukenbill 2005; Shore-Goss 2013). Communion incorporates both the spiritual and the physical. In addition to the Eucharist, many couples embrace and kiss, friends hold hands and in most congregations the pastor prays over congregants.

Brumbaugh (2007) concentrates her study of the New Life MCC church in Los Angeles on an analysis of the ritual of communion as vital to the process of identity congruence. Using Anderson and Foley's (1997) understanding of ritual as telling stories that create a sense of both individual and group identity and Driver's (1998) theory that ritual creates social order, she analyses communion as a ritual and as narrative building. She identifies six themes in her analysis of MCC New Hope: Communion as demonstrating love and acceptance, communion as tolerance of religious diversity, communion as creating a sense of belonging, communion as affirming same-sex partnership and communion as an act of social justice (Brumbaugh 2007: 21). Using Abes and Kasche's (2007) queer analysis, communion can also be understood as a site for identity congruence, as performative within a liminal space. According to Browne (2010) embodied practices queer space through repetitive actions that transgress normative boundaries.

Practice – music

Music has also been noted in literature as central to transformation of discourse. Lukenbill (2005) identifies music as core to the creation of discourse and the imparting of information in an LGBT-affirming congregation (MCC Austin). Although the MCC is a non-monolithic structure and each congregation offers a variety of music traditions, these should conform to the MCC's accepted broad theological concepts: 'upholding racial, social, cultural and political diversity, gender equality, self-esteem and acceptance and the gender neutrality of God' (Lukenbill 2005: 170).

Similarly, Wilcox's (2003) survey of two MCC congregations in Los Angeles indicates that when asked what had the greatest effect upon them, music was equally important as communion or the sermon. Using Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Lincoln's (1989) theory of discourse in the construction, maintenance and de-construction of social order, she discusses at length the role of symbolism, including music, in the process of meaning making and the creation of discourse. Among other findings she identifies the importance of ritual, symbolism and music in creating myth and discourse that aids in the de-legitimisation of the old order and the legitimisation of the new. In this way the MCC supports the integration of LGBT Christians' sexual and religious identities.

Warner (2005) also argues that music both contributes to unity as a group, and facilitates inner connection to an elemental and emotional part of the self. He proposes that music transcends the 'individual' and 'communal', dissolving boundaries and binding them together.

Practice – coming out as a sacrament

A third central ritual, specific to the LGBT religious community is ‘the sacrament of coming out’ (Glaser 1998; West n.d.). In accordance with Gorman’s earlier study, Shallenberger (1998) also identifies ‘coming out’ as same-sex attracted as crucial to the resolution of conflict. Coming out is framed consistently as part of the religious experience of faith, belief and often suffering (Wilcox 2003; Drumm 2005). Coming out is deeply entwined with the religious experience. Enroth and Jamieson (1974: 41) report in their inaugural study that the MCC was developing a ‘liturgy of coming out’ as a vital phase of spiritual development, which can be understood as similar to baptism. The MCC today recognises coming out as a sacrament, in that coming out indicates that ‘we are embracing our GLBT identity as an invitation to go deeper in our spiritual journey’ (West n.d.). Glaser (1998 in West n.d.) wrote that coming out is a ‘rite of vulnerability’ which aids in attaining communion with the sacred. Through coming out, LGBT Christians can identify with the coming out stories in the Bible, such as that of the chosen people (coming out of the wilderness of Egypt).

Lesbian feminist theologian and priest Carter Heyward (1989, cited in West n.d.) stresses the importance of coming out as a process of ‘fruitful dynamic tension’. She draws parallels with the tension between revelation and concealment, not only in the lives of LGBT Christians but with the nature of divine revelation itself. These theologically-framed understandings of the sacrament of coming out can be understood from the perspective of liminality (Turner 1954). The expression *rite of vulnerability*, for example, is reflective of Turner’s second liminal stage of marginality where a person ‘dies to her/himself’ (Gorrell 2005: 318) in order to enter a transitional phase before emerging somewhat altered.

This process, described by Heyward as fruitful dynamic tension, is echoed by Turner’s understanding of liminal process as the ‘seed for change’ (1982: 45). Although a variety of

factors alter the significance of coming out, most empirical studies of LGBT Christians include coming out as an important stage in the process of identity integration, if not integral (Drumm 2005; Wilcox 2003). Indeed, without coming out to self and others, the process would not begin, or it would be rendered unnecessary. Coming out is also critical in the expression of the ‘true’ sexual and religious self the authentic self.

Authenticity

Rarely is authenticity articulated as a central theme amongst LGBT Christians. However it is implicit in the theological premises of ‘essentiality’ and ‘suffering and resurrection’ outlined earlier (Comstock 1993). By ‘transforming pain and resurrection’ (Comstock 1993: 9) LGBT Christians can feel authentic, empowered, valuable and chosen. Speakman (2009) articulates explicitly that through struggle the lesbian Christians in her study express the qualities of ‘uncompromising’, ‘genuine’ and ‘authentic’. Rives (2005: 1) also describes the resolution of identity conflict between sexual and religious identities as reaching a ‘dynamic, spiritual and authentic’ state. Tan (2005: 136), similarly describes spirituality as promoting ‘authenticity, openness and compassion’.

The second half of this chapter looks at the multiplicity of LGBT identities and tensions that arise, in particular within Christianity.

Unresolved Tensions – LGBT Identities and Christianity

Given the context of Christianity as a patriarchal institution, as well as the empirical data which indicates a dearth of lesbians found in LGBT-affirming Christian groups, a gendered analysis of LGBT Christians is required in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this issue (Primiano 1993; Yip 1999; Kirkman 2001; Morrow 2003; Wilcox 2003, 2009).

A second contention that becomes apparent when investigating the experience of the LGBT Christian community is the unique experience of bisexuals (Yip 2010; Browne 2010). The standing of bisexuality within Christian groups and the MCC is precarious, given the importance of identity essentialism as a management strategy. According to Yip (2010), little theological de-stigmatisation of bisexuality exists, suggesting it is even more subversive of heteronormativity than is homosexuality. The ambiguity of bisexuality and of transgenderism remains in tension with the Christian worldview.

The following section considers the Christian church and patriarchy and heterosexism within it. Second it looks at the little work done on the construction of masculinities within the LGBT Christian groups. This is followed by a review of research on lesbians within Christianity, followed by empirical studies which target the experience of bisexual and transgendered Christians.

Patriarchy and heterosexism in Christianity

Theologians of nearly all affiliations agree that Christianity is a patriarchal religion and that the Bible is a patriarchal document (Comstock 1993; Raphael 1999; Bouma 2006). Comstock's (1993) *Gay Theology without Apology* bases his reinterpretation of theology on an exposition of the Bible as contextually and historically constructed and as being a document created by men and for men's needs. At the time it was also a humanitarian document, with men given responsibility to protect and care for those subordinate or in need, including women and the poor and needy. The Bible traditionally promulgated a patriarchal sexual ethic, which prescribed behaviours that men should follow to retain social control and order. Heterosexual men were given the power and credit for procreating, while women are to be controlled and at times protected, but never empowered. The covenant with God was a

(heterosexual) male affair (Comstock 1993: 37). Even though the Bible was written over 2000 years ago, patriarchy remains manifested and maintained within the Christian church by mostly male leaders (Morrow 2003; Kirkman 2001). It is understandable that, despite efforts to be inclusive, tensions remain within the newly-founded LGBT Christian organisations.

Constructions of gender in the MCC

From as early as 1974 tensions between men and women were apparent within the MCC church. Although fewer than 10 per cent of the young MCC church in the 70s were lesbians, lesbian feminist Phyllis Lyon could not understand their involvement, as ‘the church is a male organisation’ (Enroth and Jamieson 1974: 82). According to Enroth and Jamieson, who were clearly unsympathetic to the MCC, a problem of ‘inherent antagonism’ between male and female members of the congregation was noted. This, they said, was unknown in ‘straight churches’ (Enroth and Jamieson 1974: 84). However, the MCC was and still is committed to inclusivity and other women saw the MCC as the ‘vanguard of the Christian feminist movement’ (Enroth and Jamieson 1974: 83). As the first female MCC minister Freda Smith expressed, men and women can regard each other as human beings and not as extensions of roles, such as husbands or wives, imposed upon them by society.

She and other lesbian members and pastors began agitating for change and had to struggle for inclusive language in liturgy and songs, and for the ordination of women pastors (Wilcox 2003). In 2000 there were an equal number of male and female pastors in the MCC worldwide (Wilcox 2003). Gender equality is one theological concept each congregation is obliged to uphold, expressed by the song, ‘Our God is not a woman, our God is not a man; our God is both and neither, our God is who I am’ (Lukenbill 2005: 167). However, Lukenbill (2005: 174) describes discontent amongst some MCC male members about the

restraints that inclusive language places on their faith and songs of praise. At the time of Lukenbill's study, for example, the praise hymn 'The Lighthouse' was sung at some MCC services. It included non-inclusive language, reading, 'And I thank God for my lighthouse, I owe my life to him ...' (Lukenbill 2005: 176). He suggests that this would not have been accepted at an earlier stage of the MCC development.

A recent study by Sumerau (2012: 1) of men in one MCC congregation identifies how gay men 'constructed compensatory manhood acts', emphasising patriarchal control, rationality and Christian relationships. Despite their intentions to be inclusive, the men reproduced traditional patriarchal values, feeling superior to women and their non-religious gay counterparts, a similar finding to Primiano (1993). Both Gorman (1980) and Primiano (1993), in their studies of LGBT-affirming congregations report a disproportionate number of males. In the Dignity congregation (Primiano's study), for example, there were 10 women and 225 men. Primiano later identifies that women were not attending for social reasons: the congregations had developed a gay male culture which was too concentrated on men and their specific culture, or unsympathetic to the women, occasionally to the point of being hostile (Primiano 1993; Wilcox 2009).

Morrow (2003) examines the impact of heterosexism and patriarchy on lesbians, and the difficulties they encounter. She first describes how powerful the church remains as a social institution in legitimising broad moral constructs, particularly in regard to sexuality and gender. She reports that due to the conceptual construction of the deity as male, women are more likely to remain marginalised within religious institutions, a position that is magnified by being both a woman and a lesbian, the combination of which is regarded as 'particularly vile' (Morrow 2003: 110). The following section examines some empirical findings of the experience of lesbians, as distinct from gay males.

Lesbians in Christianity

There are fewer women involved in LGBT-affirming Christian churches, contrary to the pattern within mainstream churches in Australia which sees a higher attendance of women than men (Australian Broadcasting Commission [ABC] 2012). A similar pattern is found in Jewish LGBT synagogues in the USA (Shokeid 1995, in Wilcox 2009). Much of the research done on the MCC, for example, describes the experience of men, simply because the great majority of the members were and still are men. While many of the earlier studies on LGBT Christians do not explicitly recognise this, being mostly carried out by male researchers, since the late 1990s there has been a more inclusive approach. It is imperative to research the complex relationship between men and women within the religious field. As Wilcox (2005: 203) remarks, 'to understand religion fully we need to take gender into account'.

A small number of researchers have addressed this discrepancy and compared the experience of men and women explicitly in order to understand it (Rodriguez 2009). For those that have, the absence of women can be explained by looking first at the nature of the Christian institution, and second at the social arrangements within the LGBT Christian denominations and the often-heightened tensions between gay men and lesbians.

Yip, who can be regarded as most prolific in his research on the gay community in Europe, recognises the limitations of his research, which throughout the late 1990s deliberately concentrated on the gay male community. Despite this, in one of his (1997b) studies of gay and lesbian Catholics the results were portrayed as representing gay and lesbians, although only 10 per cent of his respondents were women. He did, however, articulate that the social status and experience of lesbians is 'sufficiently different as to warrant separate analysis' (Yip 1999: 48).

Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000), two of the earliest researchers to study both gay men and lesbians, identify in their study of the MCC New York that women do respond to the Christian environment differently than men. They found that sexual and religious identity integration is easier for women than men, with over 80 per cent of women reporting integration of their sexual and religious identities compared with 62 per cent of men (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000). Fascinated by this unexpected gender difference, they conducted further analyses, and found that women are also far less likely to report conflict at all (Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000). This is supported by Shokeid (2005), whose research on lesbians in an LGBT-affirming synagogue shows they experienced far less conflict than men. Speakman (2009) similarly found in her study of conservative lesbians that all succeeded in managing acceptable negotiations of sexual and religious identity in order to remain Christian. Mahaffy (1996), however, found that 75 per cent of the lesbians in her study did experience conflict between their religious and sexual identity.

Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) propose that an explanation for the women feeling greater integration is that they attend services and church-related activities more often than men. In addition women in general show greater religiosity than men (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000: 345). According to Rodriguez and Ouellette, another possible reason for the women's comparative lack of conflict is the relative lack of explicit Bible references condemning woman-to-woman sexual activity³. What becomes clear, however, through the questions this study generated, is that the issue of gender is complex and significant.

Another point Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) raise is that the women in the study felt empowered by the inclusive nature of the MCC congregation in general and by the fact that

³ There is a single biblical passage (Romans 1: 26 - 27) that condemns female homosexuality. This is compared with seven that explicitly or implicitly condemn male homosexuality.

the congregation under study had a woman pastor. This, they propose, is also connected to the final point in their discussion, that women possibly experience conflict with the church in a different way than their gay male counterparts (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000). The women, they conclude, probably experienced conflict previously with the male-dominated Christian church simply because they were women, less so because they were lesbians (over half were previously Catholic). This is a similar finding to Kirkman (2001), whose respondents felt more alienated from the Christian church due to their being women, than being lesbian. She also found that many lesbians are not attracted to the exclusiveness of the MCC church, and that when visiting found 'mostly 40 year old gay men' (Kirkman 2001: 223).

The response to the MCC by women seems to be complex. On one hand, women feel empowered; on the other they are marginalised. As Wilcox (2006) commented, the leadership of each congregation seems to have a large impact on the make-up of the congregation. While female pastors attract women, and male pastors drive women away, female pastors do not seem to drive men away. Wilcox, in her most recent study to date, *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* (2009) concentrates her analysis on individualism. She concludes that women tend to individualise their faith and move away from the narrow confines of Christianity.

Kirkman (2001) in her New Zealand study discovers a similar reflexive individual process as identified by Wilcox. Her participants blend a religious reflexivity with feminist worldviews with which the respondents construct new ways of remaining Christian. She proposes that women use feminist spirituality to bridge the gap between their sexuality and their Christian beliefs. Based upon interviews with 30 women, she finds that the participants highlight the commonalities of lesbian women and other women within the context of Christianity, and

that gender is an intervening structure especially in the relationship of being lesbian and Christian. While her study identifies the role of religion in binding people together through ritual, she questions whether it shores up or destabilises patriarchal gender relations (Kirkman 2001).

Bisexual and transgendered Christians

According to Reverend Martha Daniels, a practising bisexual Christian minister, bisexuals are ‘not even on the page’ (2010: 46). With few exceptions, bisexuality (and transgender) does not rate a mention, both in theoretical work or empirical research. The bisexual experience is subsumed into that of the LGBT or queer banner. When Daniels became a minister at the MCC, she slowly began to understand that despite outward acceptance her sexuality was not regarded as legitimate, that she really needed to ‘find her true identity’ (Daniels 2010: 46). Toft (2010: 271) reports a similar finding from one of his participants in his study on bisexual Christians, who expresses that the MCC is dismissive of those without same-sex partners.

Not only does bisexuality raise the ‘ugly head of polyamory’⁴, it represents ambiguity, something that most people find themselves uncomfortable with. Dinnie and Browne (2011: 1), in their research on bisexual women in Findhorn Community⁵ in Scotland, discovered that even in this liberal spiritual new age environment, the participants’ fluid sexuality was resisted by others, who continued to label and categorise them. Their fluid identity, they report, ‘became re-subsumed into heteronormativity’, leading the participants to ‘have to

⁴This is despite the fact that polyamory can be practised just as effectively by same-sex or heterosexual identifying individuals.

⁵ Findhorn Community was founded as a liberal spiritual community in Scotland in 1962. It became famous for its horticultural ‘wonders’.

come out and identify all over again' (Dinnie and Browne 2011: 1). Yip (2010) theorises that due to the misconception that bisexuals always practise simultaneous relationships with people of both sexes, the possibility of polyamory is destabilising and threatening to the Christian coupled (and committed) model of relationships. This creates fear and mistrust of bisexuality within both the heterosexual and non-heterosexual religious community. Many bisexuals would be under pressure to choose either 'normalcy' with someone of the opposite sex (Crapo 2005; Yip 2010), or to identify as lesbian or gay (Sell 2005; Daniels 2010). Bisexuals, thus, upset both the binary of either identifying as hetero- or homosexual and the monogamous dyadic model of relationship.

A further problem underlined by Toft (2010) is that bisexuality is seen to undermine the basic logic of essentialism that runs throughout the gay-affirming theology and discourse of LGBT Christian sites of worship. Although they are welcomed, the spiritual needs of bisexuals are not catered for within these organisations (Crapo 2005). In his dissertation, Toft (2010) finds that bisexual Christians have an even greater tendency to individualise their religion than do gay or lesbian Christians, and that they leave traditional religions for three main reasons. The first is on principle because Christianity seeks to define their relationships within a dyadic structure, the second is based on practice, for example marriage, which is centred upon the couple, and third they feel misunderstood because both hetero- and homosexuals see their sexuality as a choice. Thus bisexual Christians are 'cast into the wilderness', finding far fewer supporting communities, resorting to family and friends, and individual worship. Hutchins and Williams (2010), in their introduction to a special issue on 'Spiritualities' in the *Journal of Bisexuality*, identify queer theory and liminality as valuable in analysing the bisexual Christian experience. The challenge bisexuals present to normative sexualities and genders, be they homo- or heterosexual, can be regarded as a truly disruptive 'queering' of Christianity.

Just as bisexuals unsettle and destabilise essential sexualities, transgendered Christians shake up normative expectations of gender. In studies investigating the intersection of religion and non-normative sexualities they have hardly been registered as existing (Wilcox 2002; Stone 2007; Kennedy 2008; Kidd and Witten 2008). Levy and Lo (2013), however, mapped stages through which gender questioning, transgender or transsexual Christians go in resolving conflict between their religious worldview and their gender identity. They discovered that the issues which transgendered individuals face at the intersection of Christianity are compounded by the complexity of gender, as well as an ambiguous and fluid sexual identity. Within Christianity transgendered individuals often face deep internal conflict, and are many times rejected and ridiculed by others (Levy and Lo 2013). The presence of transgendered individuals in Christian organisations challenges essential understandings of gender that underpin much theological rhetoric. This is the case even in LGBT-accepting spaces such as the MCC.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed empirical literature that describes the religious experience of LGBT Christians and how these individuals negotiate their sexual and religious identities, resolving possible conflict. First it discussed studies that emphasise the role of theology in implementing strategies to resolve conflict and anxiety. Second it looked at studies that emphasise the role of the group. Finally I described studies that concentrate on religious practices, and the role these play in the re-building of faith. I place emphasis on studies that analyse ritual as an aid to the internalisation of a re-constructed discourse. Both biblical re-interpretation and essentialism affirms LGBT sexualities, however, this is most transformative in conjunction with the congregation as a safe place of worship. This is particularly relevant to the site of the present study, MCC congregations in Australia.

The second section dealt with the LGBT Christian community as a complex heterogeneous community, existing with differences in tension. Lesbians, for example, experience Christianity differently from their male counterparts. This was discussed with reference to Christianity as a patriarchal and heteronormative environment. Finally the dilemma of bisexuality and transgender within Christianity was briefly outlined.

As expressed by Rodriguez (2009) research, although growing both numerically and in complexity, remains fragmented. My research project is informed by the reviewed literature, in that it, first, addresses geographical gaps in empirical data, second, responds to areas of contention and third, extends conceptual understanding of the problem of LGBT Christians. There has been little research done in the Australasian region. Qualitative research projects can only add to the understanding of the lived experience of LGBT Christians as each individual has a unique experience. Further research projects can also develop better understanding of particular areas of contention. For example, I concentrate on a detailed examination of the importance of emotional, relational and religious practices as opposed to cognitive factors in the resolution of conflict between religious world view and non-normative sexuality. Connected to this is the development of a greater conceptual understanding of the transformation of religious world views, deeply embedded in culture and habitus.

The literature review also reveals conceptual tensions between the tenets of Christian faith and non-normative sexualities and gender. On one hand lesbian and gay male Christians in general understand their sexuality as an essential element of their being, given by an ultimate creator – God. The response to bisexual and transgender Christians trouble such essential understandings, as does queer theory and constructivist sociological understandings. My final research question is prompted by this debate. I am interested in how queer theory

translates into everyday existence and into the ‘messiness of real life’ (Yip 2010: 45) and relationships, in particular in the field of Christianity.

The next chapter outlines the theoretical framework within which my study is situated. It looks at the identity constructions of LGBT Christians, in particular the emphasis on the expression of the true, authentic self as a moral mandate. It examines conceptual understandings of transformation of religious world views and habitus, and discusses the inherent tensions between the queer expression of Christian faith and the institution of Christianity.

Chapter 3: Authentic, Religious and Queer Lives

Introduction

This chapter builds a theoretical framework around which a nuanced understanding of the lives of the LGBT Christians can be developed. To do this I link the concepts of authenticity with the religious lives of the LGBT individuals, and discuss the complex relationship with queer theory. I also expand on the theoretical understanding of the religious field and religious belief, concentrating on theories that recognise the experiential and emotional aspects of religion. Finally I examine theories of transformation of identity. These three conceptual areas enable a comprehensive examination of the tensions and processes of integrating sexual and religious identities (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2006) and form the toolkit of my analysis.

First, I employ Taylor's (1991: 15) concepts of the 'ethic of authenticity' and 'horizons of significance' (Taylor 1991: 38) to analyse the LGBT Christians lives. I then examine two main concepts central to queer theory, heteronormativity and performativity. I finally examine the tension between the individualistic desire to discover the authentic self, and the resultant 'queering' of individuals and spaces.

The second major conceptual framework centres on the lived experience of religion. Here I use Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus to explain how and why religion is so important to those who are brought up within a religious environment. Habitus refers to enculturation, of early experiences, contexts and practices that remain as 'residual dispositions' that lead to the reproduction of ways of 'thinking, feeling and acting' (Bourdieu 1990: 53). Additionally,

belief according to Bourdieu (1990: 68) is a ‘corporal nexis’ – a bodily state - rather than a thought process. This is consistent with the understanding of religion as an emotional and experiential phenomenon (Riis and Woodhead 2010; Taylor 2007). Models of emotion and cognition and their complex relationship are then discussed. .

A third discussion centres on the transformation of identity. In order to live authentic Christian lives LGBT individuals often enter a process of identity negotiation and transformation. If the nature of religion is enculturated and reproduced in ways of thinking, feeling and acting as suggested by Bourdieu (1990) and fundamentally relational, emotional and experiential (Riis and Woodhead 2010), the process of transformation must encompass relations, emotions, cognitions and practices. Ahmed’s (2004) understanding of emotion, the concept of liminality (van Gennep 1909) and performativity (Butler 1990) aid in understanding the process of transformation of religious habitus and individual identity.

The Ethic of Authenticity and Queer Theory

Taylor’s concept of the ‘ethic of authenticity’ and queer theory, two seemingly incompatible theoretical perspectives, are relevant to the lives of the LGBT Christians in this study. This thesis shows how they are compatible as the participants in this study strive to live an authentic existence, expressing their non-normative sexualities and/or gender. Such individualist freedom raises ethical dilemmas peculiar to the contemporary world. In respect to this study, for example, conservative voices view LGBT individuals as ‘choosing’ to live a certain lifestyle, a lifestyle they see as an immoral. Some express alarm at the perceived moral decline associated with the postmodern ‘slide into relativism’ and the subsequent breaking loose from moral norms that leads to narcissistic and hedonistic lifestyles.

Theorists such as Bell (1976), Lasch (1979) and Lipovetsky (1989/2005) maintain that the culture of self and authenticity in contemporary life is narcissistic and denies individuals higher or expanded meaning beyond themselves. Their lives, they say, are narrowed and flattened. Taylor (1991), however, argues that authenticity can be an important and meaningful moral framework: ‘an ethic of authenticity’ (Taylor 1991: 15). In the case of the LGBT Christians in this study, the true self is the expression of a God-given sexuality and gender, which one is morally obliged to reflect.

Culture of authenticity

Taylor (1991) argues that the moral landscape of modern Western society is far from hedonistic and meaningless, but rather complex and nuanced. He acknowledges the problem and reality of moral relativism, but argues the critics do not recognise the diversity displayed by individuals. He suggests that many individuals express a ‘moral ideal’ of being ‘true to oneself’ (Taylor 1991: 15, 35; 2007: 475) that leads to a ‘culture of authenticity’. The culture of authenticity initially emerged from romantic expressionism in the late 18th century and holds that everyone has their own unique way of being and of realising humanity. Added to this is the reactionary response to the modern rationalised ‘buffered man’ [sic] (Taylor 2007: 476). The resultant post-modern individualistic desire to find the unique self and to live accordingly is fostered. This is particularly relevant to this study when looking at the desire of the LGBT community to ‘come out’ and be open about their sexuality and to resist conformity to an ideal imposed from outside, a move particularly notable since the 1920s. In this way, desire, morality and sense of integrity come together with the insistence it is wrong to hide and a moral obligation to realise the true self (Taylor 2007).

Ethic of authenticity

Taylor maintains that many contemporary individuals live within moral boundaries according to ‘the ethic of authenticity’ (Taylor 1991: 15). The ethic of authenticity is an intelligible moral framework and the basis of authenticity in a higher form. It is by its very nature dialogic and constrained within backgrounds of intelligibility, common moral precepts (Taylor 1991: 37). Taylor describes these backgrounds as ‘horizons of significance’, or shared understandings of what constitutes a moral life that necessarily are relational. Taylor’s argument is based upon the sense of self, and from where our sense of self emerges and develops. He uses this understanding of identity as dialogic to address the tensions between the ethic of authenticity, and the so-called ‘slide to subjectivity’ or moral abyss, which is associated with postmodern thought.

Identity as dialogic

Historically identity or sense of self was defined by social class and status. In contemporary society individuals construct and define themselves reflexively and individually (Giddens 1992). The desire to be an individual, to do things ‘my way’, to be true to oneself, developed through this new sense of reflexive definition of self and reflexive desire to be connected to the inner true self (Taylor 1991: 29). Despite this new sense of self-determining freedom and choice, according to Taylor (1991) no individual is free of external influences. Identity, for example, is formed in significant relationships (Taylor 1991). Mead (1934), for example, articulates that individuals define themselves ‘dialogically’, in relation to others, whether in resistance to or in accordance with others.

Taylor maintains that late modern theories on free-floating reflexivity and liquidity ignore the dialogic nature of identity and sense of self. No individual forms, develops and transforms

her/his sense of self as an individual. Significant relationships are relationships with ‘significant others’ (Sullivan 1940). Significant others are those who ‘matter enough to effect change in self-definition’ (Sullivan 1940: 34) and contribute to identity development and lifelong transformation, even when this is an unconscious occurrence. Significant relationships can be with family members, partners and peers, other persons in positions of authority, as well as spiritual entities, more specifically God or Jesus. The crux of this discussion is the connection of identity to the ethic of authenticity and horizons of significance.

Horizons of significance

As identity formation is dialogic, the freedom to define the self occurs within the boundaries of how others define us. Taylor (1991: 33–36) identifies how the relationship to others and society form ‘inescapable horizons’ or ‘horizons of significance’, morally reasoned conditions of what is of significance in defining the self. Significant conditions cannot be decided arbitrarily; what is significant is not determined by the self. According to Taylor (1991: 35), when an individual chooses self-fulfilment without regard to (a) ‘the demands of [the] ties with others, and (b) the demands of something more or other than human desires’ the conditions for realising authenticity are destroyed. Denying the past or ignorance of others beyond the self both form conditions that ‘collapse horizons of significance’ (Taylor 1991: 22, 39). Within the framework of self-determining freedom the choice per se does not confer authenticity, if choice is seen as an end in itself (Taylor 1991). Choice is rather the means to an end, and what is done with the choice matters. Whether a person lives according to horizons of significance determines what constitutes an authentic life. Horizons of significance could be determined through those close to the self, through partners and family,

or through more broad relations with others and society, religious beliefs or connections to nature.

What constitutes an authentic life?

An individual seeking significance in life trying to define him/herself meaningfully has to do so in relation to important questions (Taylor 1991). Taylor (1991: 40–41) asserts:

I can define my identity only against things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters ... only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demand of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define my identity for myself that is not trivial.

He maintains that some narcissist choices are indeed shallow – not because of the culture of authenticity but because they go against it. Horizons of significance provide a context within which meaning can be created as an individual; they provide personal connections to higher causes than the self and are, according to Taylor, intrinsically tied to the sense of self and relations to others. The desire to live an authentic life, although an individual project, is intimately connected to others. Relationships with significant others determine what constitutes a meaningful life. In addition the pursuit of authenticity is also connected to others beyond those in the immediate environment, with society as a whole.

As Taylor suggests, the authentic meaningful self cannot be created without taking into consideration others and something greater than the self (Taylor 2007). This may be, as in the case of the participants of this study, through an external belief in God. Their belief in God is central to living according to an ethic of authenticity, in particular in the realm of love

and intimacy, which Taylor understands as the ‘prime loci’ (Taylor 1991: 47) of self-fulfilment and self-discovery.

Connected to this dialogic relationship of identity creation and self-fulfilment is recognition by others (Taylor 1991). This is peculiar to the contemporary world where identity development is a negotiated reflexive process, rather than a given. It is particularly relevant to the same-sex attracted individuals in this study for example, for whom ‘coming out’, proclaiming publically the true sexual or gendered self, is central to the notion of living according to an ethic of authenticity. Coming out is understood as a moral mandate driven by the relationship with God and Jesus. Thus for the LGBT Christians in this study, an authentic life is a queer life.

Queer Theory

Queer theory offers some useful insights and conceptual tools to understand and analyse the religious experience of the LGBT Christians. I use a queer framework and an understanding of identity as fluid to analyse the experience of LGBT persons who are deeply committed to Christianity. A fluid model of identity enables an integration of multiple identities – identities that are fused and inseparable rather than interconnected, but distinct in nature (Abes and Kasch 2007). Heteronormativity and performativity, two concepts highlighted by queer theory, are particularly useful in that they ‘resonate with the development of multiple identities’ (Abes and Kasch 2007: 621).

The concept of heteronormativity aids in gaining an understanding of the context within which many LGBT Christians struggle. Performativity helps understand the dynamic of change – how individuals exert agency and transgress normative boundaries of sexuality and/or gender, a process they engage in when seeking to express the authentic self. In doing

so, individuals queer space (Roseneil 2000; Paris and Anderson 2001; Browne, Munt and Yip 2010) and arguably, in the case of the participants in this study, queer Christianity (Shore-Goss 2013). I also critically analyse the heteronormative and patriarchal order of Christianity within the congregations observed in the study and use queer theory to explore the reproduction of this normative order (Wilcox 2006; O'Brien 2007).

Tenets of queer theory

Queer theory critically analyses identity constructions, focussing on intersections of identity and resistance to hegemonic power structures that constrain social constructions of sexual and gender identity (Jagose 1996; Abes and Kasch 2007). Queer theory offers a point of convergence of a multiplicity of subjectivities (Epstein 1994) and a solution for those who see identities as constraining. According to Epstein (1994: 197) queer allows 'the maintenance of identity and difference in tension'. By decentring identity, queer allows multiplicity, enabling new ways of being, and allowing junctures of sexuality, gender and ethnicities (Stein and Plummer 1994; Epstein 1994; Elia et al. 2003; Doty in Plummer 2005; Valocchi 2005). Queer theory instigates a radical disruption and transformation of normative order (Butler 1990; Warner 1991) as opposed to gay and lesbian politics which they understand as committed to an assimilationist civil rights agenda. Thus, for example, the majority of queer theorists currently oppose the recent push for marriage equality deeming that issue an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the dominant hierarchical structures

Central to its conceptual origins is that queer analysis interrogates traditional understandings of the binary distinctions of heterosexuality and non-heterosexuality, questioning the 'natural' nature of heterosexuality. Heteronormativity (Warner 1991) describes how heterosexuality has been assumed as the 'norm' when understanding gender and sexuality,

the assumption of which may or may not be conscious. It also exposes the normative power of heterosexuality, in this case within the institution of Christianity. A second central tenet of queer theory is performativity (Butler 1990). Butler proposes that gender and sexuality are constructed through performativity – the everyday embodied actions of individuals (Plummer 2005; Lovaas et al. 2007) – questioning the formation of fixed identity and following the postmodern agenda of the deconstruction of the subject (Plummer 2005; Lovaas et al. 2007). Through performativity it challenges closure and categorisation. These concepts – performativity and heteronormativity – are particularly relevant to this study. Doing religion through embodied actions has the potential to transform space, resisting heteronormative constraints (Roseneil 2000; Paris and Anderson 2001; Browne and Munt 2010).

Heteronormativity

Queer theorists provide three key critiques of heteronormativity. The first is that it creates a binary between heterosexual and non-heterosexual in which one is regarded as natural or normal, and the other unnatural and abnormal. Second, in the process of promulgating this binary, it groups all non-heterosexual identities into one essentialised entity which reinforces the binary (Munoz 1999, in Abes and Kasch 2007). Third, queer theorists expose the way heterosexuality is privileged and thus reproduces a power imbalance.

Both Butler (1990) and Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) are influenced by Foucault's idea of discourse and raise the question that if gender is constructed and ongoing, who chooses to become or not to become a certain gender. The conclusion is that a person is not a free agent but already constrained within discursive limits that have been set by a 'heterosexual matrix of power' (Salih 2007: 48). This is similar to the concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality', coined by Adrienne Rich (1980). She likens institutional patriarchy to a matrix of power

which constrains and limits multiple expressions of sexuality. Butler argues that by recognising the normative framework of gendered existence as heterosexual, and by questioning the legitimacy of this framework, gender becomes a fragile construct, as does heterosexuality (Butler 1990).

Moreover, according to Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), without a critical analysis of the hetero/homosexual binary, contemporary Western culture remains fractured and limited. She asserts that since the turn of the 20th century, every individual is assigned summarily, with all its implications, as being not only of a certain gender but of being either hetero- or homosexual. As Foucault argues, sexuality gained an increasingly 'privileged' (in Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990: 3) position in the discourse of identity formation. She questions the logic that among all the multiple manifestations of sexuality, the gender of the object of choice of sexual desire should become the central categorising feature (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990). Similar to Butler, she was motivated by the humanist desire to combat a deeply engrained homophobic framework in contemporary western society, declaring:

To alienate conclusively, definitionally, from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure. In this century, in which sexuality has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge, it may represent the most intimate violence (Kosofsky Sedgwick, in Masterson 2006: 26).

Performativity

A second central tenet of queer theory is performativity (Butler 1990). Performativity proposes that the subject is in a state of continual performance, of doing gender for example, and recognises the non-binary and contested nature of identities. Butler's (1990) concept of performativity proposes that both gender and sexuality are not essential entities that one has

or is, but come about by doing, through multiple performative behaviours. Furthermore, these behaviours are not reflective of identity, but create it. There is no being behind the doing, no pre-existing gendered or sexual subject, but one that creates itself through what Butler (1990) calls 'performative acts'. In this way the subject is not performed and created, but it is the iteration of norms in a ritualised way that enables a temporal subject that is 'not determined fully in advance' (Butler 1993: 95). The main conceptual crux is that sexuality and gender do not exist prior to performative actions, and are therefore subject to change. Thus the dominant social construction can be resisted (though with difficulty), and identity can be altered with repeated actions, or citations (Butler 1990).

Butler was troubled by the binary constructions of both sexuality and sex and gender, and her concern was not with sexual practices per se but how sexual practices call into question gender as a stable construct (Butler 1990). Butler concentrated upon the sex/gender binary and asserted that that a person does not have or be a gender, but '*does*' gender (Butler 1990: 25; Jagose 1996; Salih 2007; Brady and Shirato 2011). She questions the subject or category, asserting that the subject, be that a sexed, gendered or raced subject, is not fixed, but 'a subject-in-process that is constructed in discourse by the acts it performs' (Salih 2007: 44).

Rather than a person having an essential gendered core, an appearance of gender is fabricated through a series of repetitive performative 'acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires' (Butler 1990: 173). Not only is the performance of self ongoing but it is engaged with multiple categories, leading to the conclusion that gender or sexuality, for example, is not our whole self. This allows for intersectionality of identity categories, a fluidity with ebbs and flows, with the possibility of multiple identity categories (Elia et al. 2003; Valocchi 2005; Doty, in Plummer 2005; Kirsch 2008). Abes and Kasch (2007: 628) further articulate that

rather than being intersecting and negotiated distinct identities, each is infused upon the other, as ‘intra-sections’.

Performativity can be utilised to understand in detail what people do and practise, as well as being pivotal to exercising individual agency and enabling change. Through the exposition of the constructed nature of gender and sexuality – the everyday enactment of doing (but never becoming), the subject can transgress the constraining heteronormative values and thus queer space. This embodied practice, within the religious context, can be during ritual, an essential embodied practice that can be transgressive, liberating and empowering. Through the performative and repetitive actions the subject can be deconstructed, reconstructed, and seemingly contradictory facets of identity can co-exist. This is discussed further in the final section of this chapter, transformation.

Queer and religion

Until recently there has been little mention of religion within queer studies, and vice versa, and the two fields seem at odds with each other (Wilcox 2007). Religion appears to be curiously disregarded, considering the role of religion in the maintenance of normative order. It also remains in some respects staunchly resistant to challenge. In particular, Christianity is usually branded as an oppressive heteronormative patriarchal institution (Wilcox 2007; O’Brien 2007). One source of divergence and tension between religious discourses and queer is apparent precisely in the field of identity. For example, essentialism, or more specifically the belief in the intrinsic nature of sexuality, is a key tool used within gay religious discourse to combat homophobia in individuals and the church. Queer theorists argue that rather than transgress and queer space through transgressing the normative order within the religious field, a new heteronormative space is being created – a white middle-class male (Wilcox

2006), bound by middle-class values such as monogamy, and creating a good gay, and bad gay mentality. In this study I both investigate individual experience and the extent to which the normative order is resisted, transgressed or reproduced in the field of the Christian experience.

Authenticity and queer

From the above discussion of horizons of significance and the notion of an ‘authentic self’, tensions become apparent between queer theory and the idea of an ethic of authenticity in two respects. First, while both stem from the individualistic desire to exist as a multifaceted being, free from structural constraints, Taylor’s (1991) horizons of significance mark a clear departure from the tenets of queer. Queer impulses delight in subverting the normative tenets upon which the horizons of significance are based. Both recognise the boundaries and limits imposed upon the individual – the normative constraints – and both recognise the dialogic nature of identity development. Yet the queer desire to subvert through performativity is in direct opposition to Taylor’s insistence that identity can only be defined in a meaningful way within the bounds of, for example, ‘history, nature, society’. It could be that for queer individuals the subversion is indeed a ‘horizon of significance’ that gives meaning beyond the self.

Second, the desire to seek and discover an authentic and true self, though constructed relationally, intimates that an essential self is to be discovered. Queer maintains the self is in continual creation, a self that can be consciously created and recreated iteratively once heteronormative structural constraints are uncovered. In this study these tensions are highlighted, as the reality of the LGBT Christians challenges the normative order, yet individuals consciously seek to live an authentic personal life, and abide by higher moral order.

Inherent paradox of queer

While individuals and space are queered, there is a paradoxical re-creation of new definitions of legitimacy. While norms are resisted, new conditions of legitimacy are created that exclude other bodies. In everyday life repetitive iterations are enacted to solidify the new identifications, as pointed out by Moon (2005a) in her focus on LGBT identifications among Christians. She describes how through citing repetitively using the genre of testimony individuals legitimate their worldviews (Moon 2005a). In general, amongst the participants in her study, with a few exceptions, their worldview holds that, while sexual hierarchies should be eradicated, lesbian and gay identities are fixed. They hold that that gays and lesbians are born ‘the way that God made them – just as He wanted them’ (Warner 2005: 183). In this manner linguistic and bodily performatives legitimate a worldview that holds an essential understanding of identity. A new intelligible legitimate subject (Butler 1993) is defined.

For Christians the LGBT identity that is ‘good’ and essential carries with it implications that define a way of life, thus recreating a dichotomous opposed ‘abject or unthinkable subject’ (Butler 1993: 3). Using this example, the abject or unthinkable subjects, those who do not conform, could be bisexuals or those who live a promiscuous lifestyle. This form of social power exercised in the name of heteronormativity is often termed symbolic violence (Moon 2005a; Brady and Shirato 2011). When re-deployed, often unintentionally, in the definition of legitimate alternate sexualities it is sometimes termed ‘homo-normativity’ (Duggan 2002; Positive Space Network Resource Person Manual 2010: 26). This is the fundamental tension inherent in the relationship between queer and religion; in fact queer itself remains in a continual state of tension. In order to understand these tensions, the following section looks in more detail at the nature of the religious experience.

Religion – Relational, Experiential and Emotional

Theories of religion have concentrated on the cognitive, with belief as central to the understanding of religion. Relational, experiential and emotional factors have been neglected (Riis and Woodhead 2010). Understanding the religious experience as embodied, relational, and emotional in large part aids in understanding the nature of the conflict some LGBT Christians go through in integrating their seemingly disparate identities, and the process of resolving such conflicts. To begin I look at Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus, in particular religious habitus. I then outline theoretical conceptualisations that offer insights into the relational emotional aspects of religion and the implications of neglecting these. Finally the relation between the body, cognition and emotion is discussed briefly, followed by a short outline of Ahmed's (2004) understanding of emotion as a dynamic which one 'does'.

Habitus and doxa

The concept of habitus, elaborated and made familiar by Bourdieu (1990: 54) describes in what way 'the pre-structured is everywhere' and how this pre-structured shapes our thinking, our emotions, our predispositions *without our very being aware of this*. He calls these 'residual dispositions' (Bourdieu 1990: 53), which reproduce of ways of 'thinking, feeling and acting'. All subjects are predisposed to act in a certain ways and respond to certain symbolic stimuli, in thought and emotion, perceptions and cognition, which forms a subjective life-world that is all encompassing, rendering critical reflection extremely painstaking (Crossley 2005). As habitus is largely unconscious, individuals are often complicit in upholding the dominant order (and resistance to change). As the result of certain religious habitus (Berlinerblau 1999), beliefs are formed. Bourdieu names these beliefs

‘doxa’, a ‘realm of implicit and unstated beliefs’ (Wacquant 1995: 185). Doxa also refers to the dominant worldview or ‘common beliefs’ or discourse (O’Brien 2007; Rey 2008; Yip 2010).

The concepts of habitus and doxa are particularly useful in understanding the internal conflict often experienced by the LGBT Christians in this study. First, through the imposition of religious habitus, pious individuals can and have throughout history perpetrated injustice, imposing their worldview on the Other, and justifying acts of physical and symbolic violence as ‘god’s will’ (Rey 2008). In relation to this project, symbolic violence is often perpetrated upon the LGBT Christians who are deemed a ‘marked other’ (Goffman 1974; Bourdieu 2000).

Through habitus and distinct worldviews, practices and behaviour are governed and reproduced. Such distinct worldviews – doxa – are often unproblematically accepted, beyond conscious thought, and experienced as natural and taken for granted (Bourdieu 1990). The church holds a powerful influence over doxa. This is not a neutral process. Power inequalities occur and reoccur as the ‘Other’ is distinguished in contrast to the dominant norms of the time. These inequalities are perpetuated due to the conscious and unconscious valorisation of the dominant ways of thinking and associated values. Thus the borders between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ are continually distinguished, as Ahmed (2004) describes, through emotional reactions to the ‘Other’. The ‘Other’ will be distinguished by a marked body. Together with the non-recognition that predispositions, tastes, sensations, cognitions and emotions are embodied and subjective, these distinctions are strengthened.

Second, habitus, or embodied disposition, elucidates the attraction of religion, which for the individuals in this project cannot be easily cast aside. As individuals, the religious perception

of the world is developed and strongly influenced by those we are related to and trust, either within the family, church or school. The religious experience is embodied as memory (Connerton 1989) and as a fundamental aspect of identity (Taylor 1991; Ysseldyk et al. 2010). Similarly religious beliefs are a ‘corporal nexis’ – a bodily state rather than a thought process (Bourdieu 1977, in Rey 2008). Beliefs are part of our disposition, relationally and emotionally grounded, rather than disembodied cognitive readings of the Bible or understanding of theology.

Taylor (2007: 3) also proposes that to believe is an experience – a world of experiences, a whole ‘context of understanding, both explicit and implicit which distinguishes the believer from the secular, the unbeliever’. He argues that the focus of faith is not belief but a sense of living a moral and spiritual life, based upon lived experiences. Many believers seek a reality outside their everyday existence, a ‘fuller, richer, deeper and more worthwhile, more admirable reality’ (Taylor 2007: 5). He describes this as an experience that ‘unsettles and breaks through ordinary sense of being in the world’.

The experience of this ‘other reality’ is marked by emotional impressions and responses (Riis and Woodhead 2010). The emotional aspects of religion have been regarded with suspicion, with parallels made to ‘savage religion which is something not so much thought as danced out’ (Marett 1914: xxxi). Ahmed (2004) suggests that invested power relations explain the lack of academic interest in emotion; similarly Riis and Woodhead (2010) contend an emphasis on emotion in the study of religion has been regarded as non-scientific and a personal and subjective issue, rather than socially significant. Emotion has also been subordinated to the mind, and relegated to the gendered female body.

Dualism, religion and gender

Historically the body has been associated with emotion and the mind with reason. Biblical references to the body abound. In most cases the body is seen as the weak vessel of the mind; the mind aims to be inhabited by the Holy Spirit, and thus purified. Paul in his letter to the Romans (The Bible, RSV: Romans 6:5) iterated that the sinful body should be subjugated by a mind strengthened by faith in the sinless Christ. Descartes (1641, in Woo 2013), while questioning the authority of the Christian church in placing reason above faith, was however, similarly placing the body in a subordinate position. In his philosophical thesis *Meditations* he proposes a dualistic union of mind and body in which the weak body was to be subjugated by a strong mind; the mind guided by reason, the body by passion (Descartes 1968, in Crossley 2005). The reasonable mind which dominates natural impulses becomes equated with culture; the body, however, remains ruled by nature (MacCormack 1980).

As described above with reference to emotion, the dualistic body is also a gendered body. As recently as the early 20th century (Durkheim 1897b: 215, in Adams and Sydie 2002: 106) the male was understood as more closely associated with the reasonable, cultured mind. Women, on the other hand, were understood as more closely associated with nature. Contemporary postmodern philosophers and feminists have challenged the dichotomous understanding of the mind and body, in particular post-war French philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty (1962). Merleau-Ponty, an existentialist phenomenologist, asserts for example that the mind is embodied and thus ‘always based upon corporeal and sensual relations’ (Grosz 1994: 86). The body is not guided by a ‘pure and knowing subject’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 3). Our body touches and sees the world, interacts with space, ‘haunts space’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 5). ‘It is an embodied subject that occupies a perspective on objects ... this perspective dictates that modes of access to space are always partial or fragmentary’ (Grosz 1994: 91).

Emotion as central to cognitive thought

Closer analysis of emotion reveals that while emotion has been historically subordinated to cognition, 'relegated to the margins' and even deemed absent altogether (Ahmed 2004: 4), emotion is central to all cognitive thought. Emotion had been understood as a 'weakness'; that by being emotional an individual is 'soft', allowing another to impinge upon them; a person thus is shaped by others (Ahmed 2004: 3). Strength, on the other hand, is seen as being hard, unemotional and unshaped by others, one's 'own person'. Hardness, however, according to Ahmed's model, for example, is not the absence of emotion, but rather an alternative 'emotional orientation to others' (Ahmed 2004: 4).

According to Ahmed (2004) the inherent product of ignoring the central role of emotion is a hierarchical 'cultural politics of emotion'. Emotion, when seen as softness and passivity, has been 'gendered as feminine and racialised as less than white', in that emotion is attached to the 'primitive' primal self (Ahmed 2004:3). Through the relationship between emotions and hierarchy, injustices can be and are propagated, where some bodies are labelled as 'being emotional' and others not. Additionally, certain emotions have been recognised as legitimate (such as righteous anger) and guided by reasonable cognitive thought, and others a sign of weakness, and unreasonable.

Cognition is thus always partial, embodied and influenced by bodily processes, past experiences, impressions, and unconscious assumptions about reality. There is no superior mind, cognitively guiding the weak emotionally laden body, but a fusion of embodied cognitive thought and emotion. Each individual is a body that has been etched and formed historically and culturally, a socially embodied subject – a lived body.

According to Grosz (1994), the body is ‘acted’ upon and acts, from without and within, through repetitive normative behaviours. Bodies are marked and inscribed upon, both voluntarily and involuntarily, violently or more subtly, but no less coercively through the dominant norms and values of a given society. Through the inscriptions – which she refers to as ‘scarification’ or ‘discursive etchings of the body’ (Grosz 1994: 142) – individuals are bound to each other according to race, class, sex, sexuality, culture, age and other social positions. Discursive etchings could be deportment or other bodily forms or movements, manner or speech, or as mundane (but no less powerful) as makeup, clothing or hair styles. In this way, for example, we ‘do’ gender, race, class or sexuality. Such inscribed bodies respond cognitively according to embodied experience, which cannot be divorced from emotion. Cognition is thus deeply entwined with emotion. Cognition and emotion both originate in the body, are lived in the body, and expressed through the body.

A socially marked body then ‘passes on’ the inscriptions, recreating and reproducing a historical body (Grosz 1994: 148), both a history that is imposed and a history of each body according to its individual desires, emotions, movements and habits. Through interaction between embodied social agents, networks of meaning are created, and enacted, networks that manifest in social structures. These structures in turn are incorporated within our body, as ‘habitus’, habits, emotions, desires, preferences and dispositions that with continual interaction become perceived as ‘natural’ (Crossley 2005).

Emotion as relational

Riis and Woodhead (2010: 5) analyse emotion as being ‘constructed in the interplay between agents and structures’. Unlike the theories of emotion which represent emotion as either originating inside and being expressed outside (psychological theory) or as originating

outside and being apprehended inside (Durkheim 1963), both Riis and Woodhead (2010) and Ahmed (2004) propose that emotions operate in relations between agents, objects and contexts. Emotion does not exist as a private internal ‘feeling’ but operates as movement between inside and private, and outside and social; between the personal and relational (Riis and Woodhead 2010). Emotions are not something we ‘have’ and are not ‘in’ bodies, but in a similar vein to queer theory in relation to identity, we ‘do’ emotions (Ahmed 2004). For these theorists, movement is the critical conceptualisation. The word *e-motion* encapsulates movement, and it is through emotion that actions and interactions are initiated (Ahmed 2004: 11; Riis and Woodhead 2010: 20).

Ahmed (2004) goes further to propose that emotions create the boundaries between bodies and bodies, or bodies and objects. Emotions ‘shape the surface of bodies through repetitions over time’ and all emotions are a reaction to objects or others (Ahmed 2004: 4). It is through the emotional response toward others that the surfaces and boundaries are felt and apprehended. Thus we all are shaped over time by the interactions with others, and according to Ahmed (2004: 11) emotions ‘transform others into objects of feeling’. She describes emotions as bodily impressions that cannot be divorced from thoughts or bodily sensations (2004). During interactions with others we make an impression, we leave an impression, we are impressed upon and an impression is left upon us (Ahmed 2004).

Emotion as powerful

Emotions create orientations to bodies and objects and occur in relationships to objects or bodies, whether visible or invisible (Ahmed 2004). The movement of emotion averts or attracts a subject away from or to an object. Ahmed (2004: 8–12) terms this ‘the sociality of emotion’. Ahmed’s model proposes that signs, words and symbols are ‘sticky with emotion’,

causing emotional attraction or aversion according to the subjective position and relation to the person or object. Objects or bodies are transformed into objects of feeling. In this study, for example, the word 'homosexual' elicits an emotional response, one of attraction or aversion, and is rarely neutral. The word is 'sticky' in that clustered around it are multiple emotional responses over time, emotional responses that are guided by normative thought, and exclude certain ways of being (Ahmed 2004: 10). The emotional responses are produced and reproduced repetitively, a concept closely related to Butler's (1990) concept of performativity. Emotions are thus integral to the maintenance of hierarchical order (Ahmed 2004: 12). Emotion in this respect is both socially constructed and socially productive. It is not power neutral.

The 'stickiness' of words, metaphors and signs relates to social norms, some of which are valorised over others. To use another example, the word 'family' is saturated with meaning eliciting emotion which excludes bodies that do not conform with the ideal, creating borders and distinctions between bodies. Those who do not 'inhabit the norm' feel discomfort as they fail to reproduce the script. In Ahmed's words, the stickiness or repetitiveness of certain citations or words leads to emotional 'attachment to the object of ... subordination' (Ahmed 2004: 12). In this way power relations are enacted in the recognition that some emotions and bodies enacting them are appropriate and legitimate and others not.

When religion is understood as relational, emotional and performed, the experience of individuals such as those in this study can be better understood. The active LGBT Christians, in seeking to express their God-given sexuality and/or gender, seek ways to remain true to their religious selves. Many exert agency and resist heteronormative constraints when entering a process of transformation of religious habitus.

Transformation of Religious Habitus

The power of resistance is central to theorising transformation. While the theoretical concepts described have all concentrated on exposing internalised normative structures that act to constrain individual agency, for example Butler's (1990: 12) heterosexual matrix, Bourdieu's (1990: 132) imposed dispositions and Ahmed's (2004: 4) emotional orientations, they tantalisingly invite challenge to the normative order. The very unconscious nature of embodied dispositions and ensuing practices means that freedom from these constraints is extremely difficult. 'Compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 1980), for example, as with 'whiteness' or 'maleness', is only visible to those who transgress those categories. Gendered and sexed bodies that do not conform to these constraints become glaringly visible as injustices are committed through often unconscious enforcement of normative expectations, and experienced as symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1990; Butler 1990). The theoretical conceptualisations mentioned by the theorists above all aim to expose the dynamic of normative reproduction, providing a means to exert subversive agency and resistance.

As the religious experience is fundamentally embodied, relational and emotional, transformation of religious habitus and religious worldview can be and is driven through relationships, emotions and repetitive practices. These form a fertile ground for change.

Emotion as transformational

Ahmed's (2004: 8) concept of 'doing' emotion helps understand the transformative power of relationships. She applies the concept of space in her analysis of orientations towards others. The word 'orientation' implies that objects attract or repel, stay close or distant according to emotional stickiness. Emotional stickiness is produced through citing the norm, leading to discomfort when bodies do not inhabit the norm. Through resisting feelings of discomfort, as

she puts it, 'there is hope of course as things can get unstuck' (2004: 16). Emotions which guide our orientation to others are either reproduced or transformed. For Ahmed, agency is enacted not from within as a dispositional trait of an individual but through what actions are possible given how we are shaped by others. Agency is relational, and enacted through multiple interactions that change the emotional stickiness of objects (Ahmed 2004: 191). The phrase 'multiple interactions' gives a clue to the dynamic closely connected to queer forms of resistance such as performativity as well as the embodied practice of religion: ritual. Central to the transformative power of both performativity and ritual is the concept of liminality.

Ritual and liminality as transformational

Ritual opens the possibility of and encourages personal and group transformation (Driver 1991). Theorists such as Csordas (1990), Driver (1991) and Bell (1992) have described the transformative power and emotional impact of ritual in the contemporary religious world. While ritual need not be associated with religious practice, the ritual performativity I am concerned with is that which is within Christian worship and can encompass a variety of embodied actions. Ritual can simply be attending a service regularly, meaning that once a week the individual enters a 'liminal' space, a place with much transformative potential. As ritual performativity is both the 'doing' and the 'showing' (Driver 1991: 88, 91 and 120) it can be giving or hearing testimony or service, receiving or serving at the altar, or hearing or singing the hymns. Ritual forms the link between symbols and bodily actions, where action is the primary initiator, be the symbols physical, or metaphysical in the case of God (Driver 1991).

The concept of liminality links transformative ritual and performatives and queer performativity (van Gennep 1909/1960). Liminality is a transitional state where social order

is temporarily suspended and ambiguity ensues (van Gennep 1909; Turner 1969a). It is the central of three stages of ritualised behaviour identified by van Gennep when studying initiation rites in non-industrial societies. The 'liminal stage' – or threshold stage enables change and is flanked by pre-liminal or separation rites, and post-liminal re-integration rites. The liminal stage, elaborated by Turner (1969a) in his study of Ndembu, is a temporary stage where previous structural constraints do not apply. The role of the liminal rite, which has its own rules, is to safely guide the individual through the 'chaos' of change until reintegration occurs, with the subject occupying an altered role within the specific societal structure.

Traditionally liminal rites enabled socially sanctioned transformation from one status, identity or situation to another *within legitimate cultural frameworks* (Driver 1991: 137). Liminality was thus a transitional stage of ritual where ambiguity and alternate social rules applied (Driver 1991). It was a state of a state of flux between two distinct stable stages. In contemporary Western individualised culture, where adherence to cultural norms is less critical, the concept of liminality holds the key to transgression and resistance; it is paralleled in the field of gender and sexuality with the queer concept of subversion and transgression of norms through performative acts (Butler 1990). In this study I concentrate upon ritual as performative, embodied and active in promoting liberation from social norms, creativity and transformation. These performative actions can be citation through words, through movement or through active rituals. Abes and Kasch (2007) consider this stage essential to understanding how performativity is actualised in individuals' lives as they resist the heteronormative binary. They term this stage a liminal state where multiple identities are fused – an ambiguous state in a permanent tension.

Ritual performativity can also heighten the religious experience. It can create an alternate reality, an unstructured, liminal reality. Individual lone actions such as fervent prayer can

create liminal realities, as can sacred places and group activities. Group activities act to focus and magnify the liminal experience. Building on Ahmed's understanding of emotion, ritual does not flow from pre-existing emotion, but emotion can, though it may not be produced through ritual (Driver 1991: 83). They are expressive of human agency and can be empowering.

Ritual as reproducing normative order

Rituals are also profoundly integrative and function to maintain order, stability and foster community (Driver 1991); they are sharing, communicative, group activities (Kertzer 1988). Through embodied physical movements, ritual activities enable the transcendence of individual beliefs, expressing pre-existent ideas and supporting consensus, and building bonds of solidarity (Kertzer 1988; Driver 1991). There need be no conscious acknowledgement of beliefs; indeed according to Bell (in Rey 2008: 112), ritual is 'lodged beyond the grasp of consciousness and articulation'. Through ritual, therefore, unconscious and unarticulated beliefs or doxa form worldviews which can be strengthened and reproduced. In this way ritual is a mechanism of the reproduction of normative order. These two functions of ritual can work dialectically. The transformative function can enable identity change, while the normative function can enable a strengthening of the transformed state of being, a new habitus.

Ritual as ethical

Finally, a ritual practice in itself is not necessarily a moral practice. Murders are committed in ritualised ways (Driver 1991). However, some forms of ritual – what Driver terms the 'confessional mode' and the 'ethical mode' – consciously direct activity to a moral end (Driver 1991: 112). The confessional mode changes an individual's relation to his/herself

and the world, a movement that ‘gives birth to the ethical mode’. This is particularly pertinent to the creation of positive emotional orientations to the self, for example the ‘coming out’ of LGBT individuals and communities. The Stonewall riots may be understood as confessional in that the performance was public and aimed at creating legitimization of self and the community (Driver 1991: 118). In a similar vein, the final stage in creating a coherent theoretical framework goes beyond the dynamic of personal change and looks at the direction of personal change.

This project acts as a case study into personal agency; the process of change, transformation and breaking free of structural constraints. The connecting thread between the theoretical approaches outlined above is the power of iterative practice. Each theoretical approach, though focused on diverse fields and approaching from different angles, emphasises the fundamental embodied and relational nature of human interactions. They all concentrate on repetitive actions through which both normative expectations are enacted and transformation occurs. Transformation can only occur through, first, awareness of injustice; second, recognition of alternatives; third, an emotional response; and, finally, *bodily practices* in *social fields* that enable and empower.

Transformation of space

Performative repetitive actions have individual and spatial consequences. They form the basis for the continual doing of, for example, gender, a concept that opens the way for fluidity and multiplicity of identity. As articulated by Abes and Kasch (2007) the transgressing, liminal subject is created, opening the way for transformation. Embodied enactments, or ritual, are central to the creation of community, stability and transformation of both individuals and spaces (Kertzer 1988; Driver 1991). According to Browne (2010), for

example, places of worship are transfigured through religious practices, relationships and interactions, and are effectively ‘queered’ (Paris and Anderson 2001; Munt 2010). Iterative performatives, whether linguistic or embodied enactments such as singing, prayer and practices of worship such as communion, change the space in which they are practised (Atkinson and Delamont 2008). The space becomes liminal (Abes and Kasch 2007), or ‘anti-structural’ (Yang 2000: 383). This, according to queer theory, is a space which continually resists heteronormative constraint. In this sense the institution of Christianity is queered. Through ritual the places of worship gain texture and take on the characteristics of the people who inhabit them (Bell and Binnie 2004; Maliepaard 2015).

I argue that the transformation of religious habitus and world-view is driven by emotion, emotion being ‘the catalyst through which individual transformation occurs and new ideas are embraced’ (Robnett 1997: 34). The religious experience is lived and practiced through relationships and ritual. These form a fertile ground for change. Through understanding the emotionality of the religious experience, the deeply ingrained religious worldview, one can understand that while change is both an extremely difficult and often painful process, it is extremely rewarding and liberating, as reflected in the stories recorded in the following chapters. Butler’s concepts of performativity, paralleled in Ahmed’s work on emotion and connected to the concept of liminality, form the crux of the analysis of both transformation and multiplicity of identity, and the transformation of space through performative actions.

Conclusion

This thesis situates the experience of LGBT Christians within the theoretical framework developed in this chapter. I focus on the religious experience as emotional and relational, an experience that is informed by religious habitus. Religious habitus enculturates ‘dispositions’

which influence ways thinking, feeling and acting. For the LGBT Christians such religious habitus can lead to internal struggles that cannot easily be resolved. However, for these participants, rather than leave the religion of their upbringing, they enter a process of negotiation and find ways of expressing their religiosity. I argue that the LGBT Christians in this study act according to an 'ethic of authenticity' in expressing both their 'true' sexual, gendered and religious selves. To do so they necessarily queer practices and spaces. Through relationships, emotion and performative ritual practices individuals transform their religious habitus. Understanding the religious experience as experiential, relational and emotional leads to a better understanding of the impact of religion; how apparent contradictions can be integrated, and how the dynamics of transformation works in individual lives.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological framework of this study: how knowledge is understood and represented, how the research problem and research questions are approached, the methods and design of the research project, the ethical implications of the study, and responses to ethical dilemmas inherent in any research project involving individuals, especially from a vulnerable community. Finally, I include an autobiographical account of the participant observation component of this study and the implications of subjectivity upon the creation of knowledge.

Chapter 4.1: In Pursuit of ‘Knowledge’: Methodology and Methods

The possession of knowledge does not kill the sense of wonder and mystery.
There is always more mystery (Anaïs Nin).

Introduction

This chapter outlines the philosophical and methodological approach and methods employed. I aim to give voice to and describe the experiences of LGBT Christians, and to understand the processes involved in negotiation of seemingly disparate identities. Previous research on the experiences of LGBT Christians is fragmented and has approached the issue from diverse angles; it therefore offers a far from complete picture (Rodríguez 2009). A second aim is to identify power relations at work between and within the Christian institutions and the congregants.

In order to do this a qualitative methodological framework is best suited, as qualitative research is able to uncover complexity, ambiguity and often overlooked nuance (Peshkin 1988; Mason 2002). I present a collective story that offers an insightful representation of the experiences of LGBT Christians. Such stories are invaluable in informing the researcher, the academic and the wider public of the ‘Other’; the experiences of an ‘Other’ or group of ‘others’ that may be of divergent ethnicity, class, gender or sexuality (Birch et al. 2002; Ezzy 2002; Creswell 2013).

In addition to giving voice to the participants and describing their experiences, using elements of grounded theory I am able to develop new theory and critique existing theory by listening closely to the participants’ voices (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2012),

offering a more nuanced understanding of the processes, from cognitive, relational and emotional perspectives (Creswell 2013).

All qualitative research has at heart interest in the experience and life-world of others, whether individually or as a group, and the interactions between them, and shares what is found through documentation and analysis (Ezzy 2002). Within the overarching qualitative research tradition there are several distinct but related branches which emphasise differing epistemological, ontological and methodological perspectives of the research process (Ezzy 2002; Creswell 2013). In this chapter I outline the perspectives and the theoretical paradigms that inform my research, specifically focusing on constructivism. Under this overarching paradigm I employ interpretivism and critical inquiry (Crotty 1998). Following this I describe the research strategies and design, the data collection methods, and the process of analysis in this study. I then discuss the implications of the methods and ethical considerations. Finally I present a detailed reflexive discussion of my experiences in the field, positioning myself and viewing my experiences critically. This is in recognition of the researcher's standpoint as being critical in the production of knowledge (Fontana and Prokos 2007).

Ontological Perspective: Epistemological Foundations

This project is guided by the constructionist ontological assumption that knowledge is found within the meaning actors create out of interactions with others, either individuals or objects (Creswell 2013). There are thus multiple realities or interpretations of reality which are arrived at through relationships between individuals and objects. As patterns of meaning are relationally co-constructed, shared meanings and interpretations coalesce and give rise to rules and norms particular to a group, forming the basis for culture and discourse (Berger and

Luckmann 1967; Lofland and Lofland 1984; Crotty 1998). These shared meanings are constructed contextually, and temporarily, and develop and alter over time (Crotty 1998). While each person's experience is subjective and relative, the meaning attributed to these interactions is very real in its consequences for those involved (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2006). Religious belief, as an example pertinent to this study, is a co-constructed system of meanings that has a powerful impact upon the self-identity of the LGBT Christians in this study, and its effect is the focus of the research.

I am also guided by the critical ontological standpoint that human interactions and change in shared meanings are driven by power relations that lead to inequality, with some realities privileged over others (Foucault 1990). Privilege and its antithesis, oppression, are based on such social characteristics as race, ethnicity, class, gender or sexuality (Butler 1990; Connell 1995). Identity, for example, is negotiated within normative discourses that create legitimate subjects, and their counterpart, the 'abject' subject (Butler 1990: 4), the less than ideal subject. This study is interested in the realities of LGBT Christians, a group that does not fit the heterosexual religious norm, one whose reality is often not recognised as legitimate.

As realities are subjective, relative and temporal, the epistemological assumption upon which this study is based is that the knowledge I gained through this study is 'partial, situated and relative' (Wetherall, Taylor and Yates 2001: 12) and is co-constructed. Thus the interactions I had with the participants of the study created a new reality, which may or may not be a shared reality. My interpretation of the experience of the 'Other', for example through conversation, participation or through observation, is necessarily partial, situated and subjective. I situate myself by acknowledging overtly my position as researcher, as female, older, middle-class and of alternate sexuality, who has at some point been involved in a quasi-Christian religious group. My interest in this study was sparked by my own experience

of tension, indeed struggle that pervaded my sense of self as moral and as whole. I was able to thus position myself, to a limited degree as an insider, but as I do not identify as a committed Christian, remained an outsider. These tensions are addressed more fully in the reflexive account of the fieldwork in the second part of the chapter.

I also sought to understand the emotional experience of the participants through participation in religious rituals, as I understand emotion to be intricately implicated in the apprehension of knowledge. I am guided by the tradition of thought that holds that there are limitations to cognitive perception as there is an unconscious, emotional and embodied response which cannot always be articulated (Grosz 1994). The 'paradigm of embodiment' (Csordas 1990: 5) argues that meaning is constructed not only by what we think, but by what we do and feel. Knowledge is thus incorporated and embodied, challenging the concept that interaction and meaning are consciously guided by cognitive thought processes. For example, I argue that the religious worldview of the participants is not formed through cognitive processes alone, but influenced deeply by religious practices and embodied memory (Bourdieu 1977, 2000; Riis and Woodhead 2010). Thus internal conflicts between a person's sexuality and religious worldview are often resolved through relationships and practices and, although informed by cognitive knowledge, are primarily relational and emotional processes. This understanding of the nature of knowledge contributed to the methodological decision to observe and participate in religious practices as well as talk to participants about these.

Theoretical Paradigms and Ideological Influences

My research questions have two major foci: the micro interactions that enable negotiation and change in individuals and the macro processes of institutional power. I thus engage in a dialogic relationship between the more traditional interpretivist and interactionist approaches,

and the influence of contemporary feminist and queer post-modern thought (Ezzy 2002; Creswell 2013). The first two research questions centre on the nature of the processes involved in the negotiation of sexual and religious identities among LGBT Christians. They focus on micro processes: relational exchanges and the subjective meanings the participants attributed to their interactions with significant others, and the negotiation of their religious worldviews. I am interested in gaining an understanding of the process of individual transformation and how agency was expressed within the limits of historically and contextually constructed norms.

The second two research questions incorporate a critical element with the aim of exposing the macro power relations within the institutions under study, in particular those based upon gender and sexuality, interrogating the patriarchal and hetero-normative tenets of the institution of Christianity, more specifically within the inclusive and LGBT affirming⁶ Metropolitan Community churches (MCC) I visited. The study was thus influenced by my feminist standpoint and aspects of queer theory. Creswell (2013: 269) describes these influences as ‘ideological stances’ where the research aims to identify and expose particular contexts and historical frameworks with the aim of empowering participants.

Taking a feminist stance, I focus upon the institution of Christianity as patriarchal, trying to tease out the position of women and their interactions with and within the progressive churches under study. My interest is in how gender was understood and ‘done’ and what personal, social and political consequences were produced through the interactions between members of the congregations, whether male, female or transgender (Butler 1990; Connell 1995). Feminism and queer theory also led me to consider my responsibility as a researcher in giving voice to and empowering the participants, who are often marginalised (Kong,

⁶ LGBT affirming denomination which has the express purpose of serving the LGBT Christian population

Mahoney and Plummer 2002; Fontana and Prokos 2007). Finally, feminism influenced my understanding of how knowledge is produced, with greater emphasis on the researcher as central in the production of knowledge. This drew me to acknowledge positionality through the auto-ethnographical section of this chapter (Wolf 1996; Goodwin, Pope, Mort and Smith 2003).

A second influence is queer theory with its emphasis first on how participants subvert and denaturalise dominant social classifications as individuals or marginal players through queer practices. Second, queer theory questions to what extent the centre, in this case institutional Christianity, is destabilised. According to Green (2007), interrogation of the centre is a central mandate of queer theory. In addition, as discussed in Chapter 3, queer theory proposes that all stable structures, in particular gender and sexuality, are in flux, and never 'are', but are always 'in the process of being' (Plummer 2005). My aim is to understand to what extent this theoretical approach is incorporated into the participants' realities.

Research Strategy and Methodological Framework

The research uses grounded theory as the central methodological framework. Classical grounded theory (CGT) was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to offer a systematic, comparative and inductive approach to the analysis of qualitative data with the intent of producing theoretical understandings of social patterns that occur in social interactions (Bryant and Charmaz 2010). Initially CGT took a post-positivist approach to knowledge (Charmaz 2006). Their epistemological approach was that the inductively emerging data were evidence of the truth about an issue which was waiting to be discovered – albeit imperfectly apprehended (Bryant and Charmaz 2010; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba 2011).

In line with the constructionist ontological and epistemological stance, however, the work of Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory is useful. This acknowledges that the data that emerge are a co-production, with the researcher playing an active part in the production of knowledge. Knowledge and ensuing theory is necessarily an interpretation of the world of the other, rather than an exact representation. This signifies a move away from the 'naïve' inductivist assumption (Ezzy 2002: 10) and recognises analysis as an iterative process between empirical data and theory, with the researcher as central to the process of production of knowledge. Charmaz (2012: 10) names this iterative process 'abductive'. As the researcher, for example, my past experiences and interactions have influenced not only my choice of research topic but also the approach taken, the research questions and the relationships with the participants (Huff 2009).

The analysis is also guided and shaped by not only my present knowledge, but also the relationships formed with participants, the observations and emotions experienced, and what insights the participants shared. In addition, throughout the collection and analysis of data, I have combined new theoretical input, whether this was gained by means of discussion with supervisors or reading new literature. I have also reflected upon the data collection as it progressed, considering and reconsidering its interpretation over time. The research process is therefore inductive and deductive; rational as well as imaginative (Bryant and Charmaz 2010).

Research Design and Procedure

To gain greater insights into participants' lives and experiences, the research employs multiple methods of data collection, or triangulation. With the aim of representing the complexity and nuance of experience in as much detail as possible (Kellehear 1993; Dingwall

1997; Liamputtong and Ezzy 2006; Creswell 2013), I undertook engagement in multiple interactions with both individuals and with groups, in an attempt to immerse myself in the religious and social experiences. The four main data collection methods employed are participant observation, an associated field diary, semi-structured interviews, and memos.

Observational methods include my participation in services, group meals, gatherings at pubs and other social occasions such as those in participants' homes. Following each interaction, a field diary was used to note observations and my own emotional responses. Semi-structured interviews (n=28) were followed by the completion of memos that record details such as demeanour of the participant, body language and, once again, my own emotional responses. The justification and procedure of the two major methods, participant observation and semi-structured interviews, are outlined below. Before describing in detail each of these two methods I outline the overall process of determining the location of participant observation and the field within which the semi-structured interviews were sourced, and the sampling logic in the choice of congregation.

Overall sampling logic: Choice of congregation

The choice of congregation was purposive, being informed by practical and theoretical reasons (Oliver 2006). From a practical perspective the MCC, being inclusive and affirming for same-sex attraction individuals, enabled access to an otherwise 'invisible' social group. As there were no MCC congregations in Tasmania at the time of this research, congregations in the largest and closest Australian cities of Sydney and Melbourne were used. Theoretically, my choice of congregation was also guided by literature that suggests MCC congregations vary according to the gender of the pastor and/or the Christian background of both the pastor and congregants (Wilcox 2009). As a result, the MCC churches contributed

to ease of recruitment and allowed an investigation into and comparison of the religious experience between individuals and congregations in terms of patriarchal and gendered practices. The MCC1 in particular holds two services each Sunday, each being aimed at a different demographic and therefore provides an opportunity to compare the different experience of congregants within one church. A total of four congregations in three MCC churches participated in the project.

In order to recruit interview participants and to conduct the participant observation, initial contact was by way of direct email to the ministers. An introductory email with information sheet attached (see Appendix 1) requested meetings to introduce the project and its aims, as well as an interview. In consultation with the pastor/ministers I intended to introduce the project to the congregation personally; however, of the four congregations in the three MCC churches, in all but one the minister introduced the study for me. While this was beneficial for me due to the trust many congregants have in the minister, this caused methodological and ethical issues. The ministers are in a position of power and I had hoped to circumscribe this ethical issue by introducing the study myself. The ministers also had a slightly different interpretation of the study, which in one case meant the congregants did not fully understand the nature of the interviews. In the second case (described in detail in the following reflexive account) the interested congregants understood the purpose in a slightly different way. These issues were resolved through further conversation; they did, however, present a challenge to my integrity as a researcher.

Over a period of seven months I visited four MCC congregations: MCC1 five times (two congregations in one MCC church); MCC2 and MCC3 five to six times each. The visits are outlined in the following paragraphs with a brief introduction to the nature of each congregation and the extent of my interaction with them:

- MCC1: As the largest of the MCC churches in Australia this church has a membership of over 300, with an average attendance at each Sunday service of approximately 50. It is the only MCC in Australia to own its premises, and is led by a part-time male pastor. The board of governors until recently⁷ was comprised of the pastor or moderator, and four male elders. The congregation is predominantly male, mostly from Protestant backgrounds. The MCC1 holds two services daily, one at 10.00am, and the second at 6.30pm. The morning service is traditional, with the aim of serving the needs of, in general, older, more mainstream Christians. The evening service concentrates on younger congregants and those who have been brought up with a more charismatic style of worship. I attended each service five times, as well as fellowship afterwards where I mingled with congregants over tea, coffee and snacks. I also attended lunch at a nearby cafe with congregants.
- MCC2: This is a small congregation which broke away from the MCC1 five years ago and which holds weekly Sunday afternoon services in a hired space in an old sandstone Uniting Church in inner Sydney. At the time of the study it was led by a male pastor, and more recently has appointed an additional female pastor. With the express purpose of reducing hierarchical structures they do not have elders or a board of governors, but ‘team members’ (Crave Metropolitan Community Church Website 2014) made up of equal numbers of females and males. The congregation is comprised of a slightly greater proportion of males, many from Protestant charismatic backgrounds with an approximate average age in the 30s. I attended four services on consecutive weeks and two on subsequent visits, a total of six visits, as well as

⁷ The board of governors now consists of the male moderator, three men and one woman.

fellowship over tea, coffee and snacks; three times I attended an informal gathering at a nearby pub after the service.

- MCC3: This small congregation holds services weekly at 7.00pm in a small rented church hall in an inner Melbourne suburb. The congregation is led by an interim part-time female pastor, and the board of governors is comprised of three males and three females. The congregation at the time of my participation was predominantly male and Protestant with an approximate average age in the mid-50s to 60s. I attended the Sunday service five times, spent time after services with congregants, and we ate meals together on many occasions.

While initially the participant observational element of the study precluded the interview component, as the study progressed over the seven-month period of visits and re-visits to the MCCs, interviews were dispersed regularly throughout the period of observation. This allowed me to respond reflexively to field experiences in interviews, and vice versa. For the purposes of clarity I will first describe the justification and procedure of the participant observation component (and the field diary) and follow this by a closer look at the semi-structured interviews (and corresponding memos).

Participant observation

Participant observation is often seen as a homogenous research method, yet according to Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) this is not necessarily the case. My own experience has convinced me that observation and participation, while intricately related, give rise to distinct experiences and have distinct outcomes. Observation of services and other social occasions enabled the gathering of data relating to overt and shared interactions (Tolich and Davidson 1999) such as external signs and symbols and religious and gendered practices. Participation,

on the other hand, laid the groundwork for the possibility of immersion into and a better understanding of the emotional world of the individuals and group (Zablocki 2001). Often religious experience is beyond articulation and is not necessarily a cognitive process (Bell 1992; Zablocki 2001; Rey 2008; Riis and Woodhead 2010). In order to better represent the participants' world view, I consider participation to be a requirement. This decision was influenced by Tosh (2001) and Zablocki (2001) who, in their experiences of researching religious groups, advocate in the interests of ethical and methodological veracity, suggesting that only through being open and vulnerable to the experience of the participants is it possible to come close to understanding their lived experience.

Participation and observation can also complement interviews. Participant observation allowed me to observe overt interactions which, according to Tolich and Davidson (1999), provide context for the stories related in the interviews. Through observing services I was later able to visualise details that were discussed during interviews, for example when speaking of ritualised behaviours such as communion. Through observation I gained a different perspective on gendered and/or hierarchical interactions between the congregants themselves, or between pastors and congregants, which were discussed in interviews. In cases where behaviours in services departed from the expected norms of the group, such as the use of gender-inclusive language, this has been noted and followed up in interviews. In this case, observational data and interview data combine to enable a rich investigation of the complexity of understanding of gender within the context of Christianity (Gubrium and Holstein 2003; Dingwall 1997). It also enabled me to take note of the queering of religious symbols and practices, and compare these between congregations.

Central to participation in the church services was the development of friendships and a level of trust that aided the recruitment of participants and their willingness to share their

experiences (Glesne and Peshkin 1992). As a consequence of attending social events for example, I was welcomed warmly at the MCC3 which enabled an easy flow of trust in that congregation.

In this research, field notes were also a source of data. During participation in services I made mental notes and wrote up field notes at the end of each day (Lofland and Lofland 1984). I occasionally verbally recorded my observations. I took notes regarding the physical characteristics of all sites, and the physical characteristics such as age, sex and clothing of the pastor and the congregations (Kellehear 1993). Sampling was both 'ad libitum' (Kellehear 1993: 130) which is non-systematic and impressionistic, taking note of anything unusual and unexpected that might have been of interest to the study, and 'behaviour' sampling which is systematic and theoretically guided (Lofland and Lofland 1984: 74–79; Kellehear 1993: 130). For example, I concentrated on specific and unusual behaviours of interest, such as the ritual of communion in the MCC churches; the shared norms of each establishment, for example the use of gender-inclusive language; and encounters and roles, such as the dynamics of relationships between the congregants themselves as well as between ministers and congregants.

I also noted my emotional responses and personal reflections as I participated in the services and social occasions. This aspect of participant observation is recognised as observation of the self and central to understanding the experience of the other (Salomonson 2004). For example, I could personally experience the emotional and embodied element of the religious experience through the singing of hymns that resonated from my childhood. Participation in religious ceremony alongside participants aids in gaining an understanding of the religious experience.

Semi-structured interviews

The second major method of data collection was the use of the semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews give insights into meanings and interpretations that cannot easily be observed, the covert or internal interactions from the point of view of the insider (Melia 1997; Tolich and Davidson 1999; Creswell 2013). They can also shed light on concurrent observations (Gubrium and Holstein 2003; Liamputtong and Ezzy 2006). In conjunction with the participant observation component of this research they are thus ideal, giving some understanding of the non-observable covert meanings.

Semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable for grounded theory as they are ‘flexible, iterative and continuous’ (Babbie 2005: 315). The data collection, coding and analysis occur to a large degree concurrently (Ezzy 2002; Fontana and Prokos 2007). This allows data to inform the progression of the research. For example when a theme became apparent as being important to a large number of participants, the open-ended questions and themes were adjusted to focus in more detail on the pertinent issue. In this study the power of communion, the importance of the safe space of the MCC, and the desire to live as an authentic Christian shine through as central to the experience of the participants. The focus of the latter interviews was adjusted to accommodate these findings.

Recruitment of interview participants came primarily through group fellowship meetings which were held directly after the services. I explained the study to those who approached me, offered them an information pack comprising an introductory letter and an information sheet, and asked potential participants to contact me if they were interested in being involved more directly in the research project. In the majority of cases those who approached me immediately agreed to an interview and we organised a suitable venue and time and date to

meet. Three potential participants were unsure as to whether they would like to take part in the study, and at a later date declined.

I also employed snowball sampling, where contacts and other participants passed on an information sheet describing the study to members of the targeted community. This was an effective way to reach individuals who felt initial distrust due to their vulnerability as a minority social group and aided not only in recruitment, but also in establishing rapport (Glesne and Peshkin 1992; Babbie 2011).

A total of 28 in-depth or semi-structured interviews were conducted with both pastors (n=3: f=1; m=2); as well as male and female members of the MCC congregations (n=23: f=14; m=7; t=2) between the ages of 21 and 78. In addition, interviews were held with two individuals: one a retired minister from the Uniting Church (a LGBT-positive church) and the other a congregant of an accepting UC congregation (Table 4.1: 96), below for demographic information. These additional interviews allowed the specific experience of those in the same-sex-attraction affirming environment of the MCCs to be highlighted.

All participants were offered the option of interviews being held in a public (but secluded) space, such as a room in a library or within their church precinct or in their home. The church precinct or other public spaces are preferable in terms of researcher safety, but for some participants the home was the most convenient or most comfortable venue for discussing such private issues (Daly 1992a). Interviews lasted between 40 to 90 minutes; eight took place in cafés, four in parks, eight at the participant's home, two in the church precinct, two at a workplace, and four by Skype.

Table 4.1: Interview participant demographics¹

Pseudonym	Sex	Age Group	Sex Id.	Rel. Upbringing
Angela	F	18–30	L	Orth
Luke	M	31–40	GM	Pent
Rebecca	F	31–40	B	Prot
Emma	F	31–40	GW	Prot
Andrew	M	18–30	GM	Prot
Matt	M	41–50	GM	Prot
Anthony	M	41–50	GM	Prot
Liz	F	41–50	B	Prot
Nickie	F	51–60	L	Prot
Mary	F	51–60	L	Prot
Lynne	F	51–60	L	Agnostic
Arthur	M	61–70	GM	Prot
Michael	M	61–70	GM	Prot
William	M	71–80	GM	Prot
Peter	M	71–80	GM	Prot
Natalie	F	18–30	L	Prot
Nova	T: m-f	51–60	Non-sex	Orth
Vickie	F	41–50	GW	Prot
Laura	F	51–60	L	Prot
Paul	M	61–70	GM	Prot
Patricia	F	41–50	L	Prot
Judy	F	41–50	L	Atheist
Annie	F	51–60	L	Pent
May	F	51–60	L	Prot
Anthea	F	51–60	L	Prot
Sylvia	T: m-f	41–50	S/G	Prot
Nathan	M	18–30	GM	Prot
Ruth	F	71–80	L	Prot
Average Age		50		

M=male; F=female; T: (m-f)=Transsexual (male to female); L=lesbian; GM=gay male;
 GW=gay woman; B=bisexual; S=straight – according to participants’ own identification

¹ Specific religious upbringing, congregational location and exact ages are not displayed in the interests of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity.

The four topics that formed the basis of the interview schedule (Appendix 5), and which are in alignment with the four research questions, are briefly outlined below:

- Growing up and becoming aware of same-sex attraction within the context of a religious upbringing, including questions about the feelings and emotions that were experienced and what strategies the individuals used to deal with this.
- The experience of ritual as meaningful to personal change.
- Gender and hierarchy within the MCC and /or Christianity in general.
- The specific experience of the MCC (or Uniting Church).

The interviews were taped and transcribed. Transcripts were sent to each participant to receive feedback, with the request that should there be inaccuracies or should they desire to make any changes or withdraw sections of the interview or withdraw altogether from the research they could do so at this point. This also gave them the opportunity to ask any questions. Nine participants contacted me after they had received the transcript, far fewer than I had anticipated. Two requested changes, mostly to the grammar as the transcripts were transcribed verbatim, and to details such as place names that were incorrectly transcribed. The others confirmed that the content reflected their views and feelings towards the subjects discussed. After analysis was completed I sent a short report to all participants outlining the findings and conclusions.

In line with the interpretivist, constructionist approach, I consider the data to be a co-production, an active engagement with the participant (Gubrium and Holstein 2003; Liamputtong and Ezzy 2006). When the interview is approached in this way, according to Fontana and Prokos (2007: 54) it also has the potential to be transformational; in their words,

it can 'leave a mark on people's lives' or can be healing or cathartic (Ezzy 2012). Several participants explicitly referred to the interview to as emotionally moving, with one later writing to express a breakthrough in her personal situation since the interview. Another expressed that through the interview he experienced moments of clarity, in recognition of the importance of a certain person in his life. Given the nature of my research I considered this transformation of both participant and researcher to be exciting and motivating. I could gain insights into the world of the 'Other' and gain a deeper emotional understanding.

Data Analysis

The project amalgamated participant observation, semi-structured interviews, field notes and personal reflections, with the result that analysis was a multi-pronged and iterative process. This was beneficial in gaining a nuanced and holistic understanding of the lived experience of the participants (Barry, in Ezzy 2002). As data collection and analysis progressed I was able to deductively critique existing theoretical proposals and inductively offer fresh perspectives on the understandings and meanings of actions as expressed by the participants (see Figure 4.1: 99). The parallel observations in the field enabled a richer understanding of the contextual and cultural issues that the participants experienced, with the aim of representing the individuals' voices with greater insight, and presenting a more rigorous form of scholarship (Dingwall 1997).

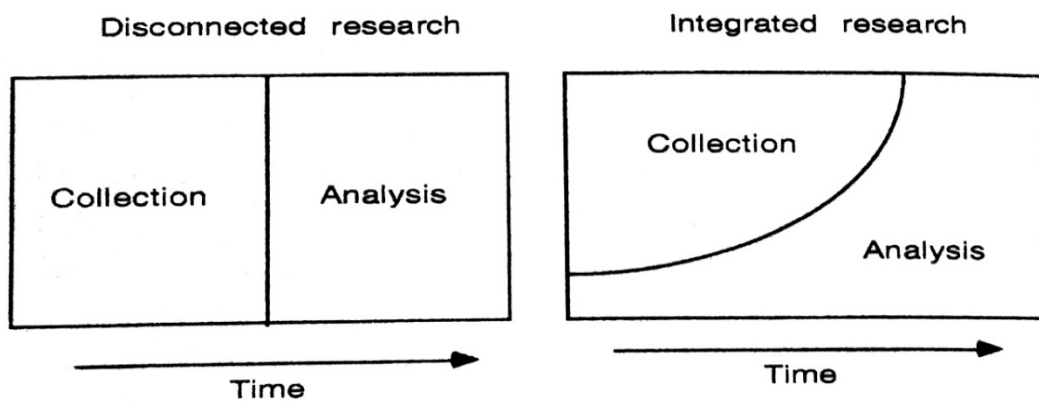


Figure 4.1: Integrated data collection and analysis

Source: Ezzy, Douglas (2002: 62) *Qualitative Analysis: Practice and Innovation*. Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin.

The procedures, both systematic and unsystematic, which I undertook in the process of analysis are outlined in the following section. I firstly describe the analysis of the participant observation element of the project, followed by analysis of the interview data. I do, however, understand both as related and co-constructed; as a consequence the first step (and a continual process) was becoming aware of my position as a researcher and interpreter of the data (Fontana and Prokos 2007). To help this process and to situate myself, I wrote reflective memos after each interview and a daily journal. As I later re-visited my field experiences and the interviews, I consulted my notes and journal to situate the impressions, conversations and interview data and to reflect upon the multiple interactions I encountered with each participant. In light of this, in order to situate myself as a co-producer of knowledge, I wrote a reflexive analysis of my experiences in the field, the second part of this chapter.

Participant observation

I began the analysis of the participant observational element of the study by creating physical files based upon the field diary entries and jotted memos. As I am particularly interested in the hierarchical and patriarchal relations, I kept details of the key persons of interest – in particular the pastors of each organisation and their interactions with congregants. I used both observations and annotations of some informal conversations with ministers and congregants to develop an understanding of the institutional relations within each congregation. Second, I was interested in ritual practices, such as communion, as specifically manifested by the congregations I visited. Third, I grouped files according to congregation, noting differences and similarities of both physical characteristics, interactions between individuals and ritual practices.

My data source consisted of both inductive observations and deductive understandings informed by academic literature, websites of each congregation, flyers and other congregational literature. In addition to these files I kept files on the fieldwork process – both how I conducted the research and the reflexive process as I encountered each congregation and individual. The filing was mundane – simply for the convenience of retrieval over the long period of participant observation, and analytical – coded according to themes that developed from the recorded data (Lofland and Lofland 1984).

The analytical files, based upon initial interpretations and patterns observed during fieldwork and the data collection process were largely imaginative and driven by personal insights. These insights were stimulated in various ways. An aid in analysis was the constant comparison method proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), for example, comparing each of the congregations in terms of practice, and searching for the most plausible theoretical

explanation of these practices. Other means were conversations with peers and supervisors, and through practical insights of other researchers.

In analysing observations of the communion ritual, for example, I firstly created a file named 'communion' I noted how each congregation practised communion, comparing similarities and differences. Having previously read academic literature on the practice of communion in the MCC denomination, and researched ritual as meaningful behaviour, I began the process of interpretation. I asked questions informed by my research questions, for example, how does communion act as performative behaviour, what does it mean for participants, and what are the outcomes of this practice in terms of both the alteration or 'queering' of space and individual identification. I used data obtained from interview participants to complement the observations and informal conversations I had described in my field notes.

In addition to observational analysis, I wrote a reflexive paper based upon my participation and observation of the self. In this paper I analysed the impact of the self upon the field, both methodologically and ethically. I reflected upon issues that were raised in the relationships between myself and key informants of power in the production of knowledge and the impact on participants, my emotional response to the participants and the institution, and the delicate balance between being an insider in some respects and an outsider in others. This paper is included at the end of this chapter. The second main data analysis was that of the 28 semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews

Analysis of the interview data was an ongoing process. From the time of the interview, the subsequent reflective memos and diary entries, through re-listening to the taped interview data, through the long process of transcribing interviews and the multiple times of 'trawling

through' the transcripts, I endeavoured to immerse myself (Creswell 2013) in the data. I began to gain theoretical insights into the stories the participants had shared, and note themes that were developing from the data.

Due to poor audio quality and my own inability to touch type, eight of the interviews were transcribed by an outside contractor. I needed, however, to listen repeatedly to these interviews to complete the transcripts, as many words were incorrectly transcribed or missing altogether. From each transcript I created a participant mind map of life events, movements and attitudes (see Appendix 2 for an example). While this was not systematic it aided in gaining an overall picture of each participant and through comparison of these I began to gain insights into patterns of behaviour and experience.

I employed inductive thematic coding for social patterns that had become apparent during initial analysis of the interview data. The further step was the initial thematic coding I engaged in by developing inductive open codes according to grounded theory practice as patterns of meaning became apparent (Seale 1999; Charmaz 2012). These were informed by time spent in the field, the initial formal interviews, my previous empirical and theoretical knowledge and conversations with supervisors and other individuals. Through this process the initial research questions which had guided my sampling and interview structure were transformed in emphasis — but not in content — as I began to recognise the themes that were important to the participants.

After this initial stage of coding where I inductively gauged the major patterns of meaning that were developing, I adopted a series of '*a priori codes*' (Charmaz 2012: 165) based upon theoretical findings of a recent study of LGBT Christians (Levy and Reeves 2011). Through data I had obtained I was able to critique these findings and propose a more nuanced and

accurate understanding. Applying the grounded theory method of constant comparison and re-grouping data, I developed and refined other themes over a longer period as I progressed with the analysis and coding process, a process which is repetitive and cyclic (Creswell 2013). The method of constant comparison also helped to counteract the danger of deductively forcing data into a pre-existing fit, a challenge faced by all researchers (Ezzy 2002). My experience was that the process of coding was organic, at times unsystematic, with moments of clarity punctuating a murky horizon of complexity. However, coding is extremely central to qualitative research as it ‘allows the researcher to move beyond existing theory to ‘hear’ new interpretations’ (Ezzy 2002: 94).

As I progressed with the coding process, after conversations with supervisors and developing theoretical understandings, my coding included axial coding and selective coding (Charmaz 2012). Axial coding encompasses a multidimensional view of patterns of meaning and action, where the researcher identifies contextual influences, and strategic and procedural factors in the data, bringing together categories at a higher level of abstraction than the initial open codes (Ezzy 2002). I linked data obtained from the observations with the data obtained through interviews, paying particular attention to anomalies in behaviour and spoken intention, and to the intersection of the two. Selective coding, the final stage, identifies overarching or core ‘stories’ and connects these to theoretical perspectives (Ezzy 2002: 93; Charmaz 2012).

This process was supported by both using computer-aided qualitative analysis (CAQDA) – Nvivo Version 10 – and manual analysis by reading and re-reading paper transcripts printed on landscape format, giving room to code on several levels on the right hand side (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2006). While the CAQDA software program Nvivo 10 aided in storing, categorising and retrieving the large quantity of data generated from the interviews,

the manual coding, searching through and re-reading of the transcripts connected me more fully with the data and allowed a greater overall grasp of the ‘voices’ of the respondents. As I sifted through volumes of printed data, and at times the audio recordings, I re-lived the interactions, narratives and emotions of respondents.

Both manual coding and NVivo were useful in developing and redeveloping the categorisations, visualising and mapping connections between codes and theoretical conceptualisations, and in practice I used both in tandem. I re-visited the data often, both in digital and paper format, as the process of coding is not linear but, as Torre (1995: 186) articulates, ‘moves between order and chaos’ and develops over time with both theoretical and relational input.

Implications of the Research Design

Most qualitative research engages in-depth conversations with a relatively small number of individuals as it is the aim to collect rich, nuanced, qualitative data which cannot be obtained in any other way (Creswell 2013). The aim is not to gain data that is statistically generalisable, in this case across all groups of LGBT Christians, but to suggest wider patterns of social experience which could be further investigated by other means (Rice and Ezzy 1999).

The choice of methods also has implications. Both participant observation and semi-structured interviews are, by nature, constructed (Mishler 1986; Gubrium and Holstein 2003; Fontana and Prokos 2007). As an active participant in the interviewing process, I clarified my position group to the participants, as a same-sex attracted woman who was at one time a participant of a quasi-Christian group. Despite this, I remained an outsider to some of the committed Christian participants in my study. There were barriers of trust that at times

separated me from the participants, and limited what was revealed to me. Some congregants, including one interviewee, were guarded in their conversations. The use of more than one method helped mitigate this. My participation in the field and the friendships I made helped to develop more trusting relationships. Observations of behaviour also were informative and helped me gain a better understanding of some issues that might not otherwise have been revealed to me (Dingwall 1997). Conversely, conversations enlightened me to the meanings behind behaviour I could not necessarily understand.

Sampling processes can also have implications for the knowledge production. The practical choice to interview participants in congregations founded on the precept of total inclusivity led, in this case, to a homogeneity of experience, which was not necessarily representative of the general population of LGBT Christians, many of whom remain within mainstream congregations. In addition, those who volunteered had certain characteristics in common. Most were highly educated and responded to my calls for volunteers expressly to support the study. In this case it was also less likely that those who volunteered were struggling with identity conflicts. Rather than being a limitation, this was ideal for investigating the processes involved in the integration of same-sex attraction and religious worldview, as the participants were able to reflect upon their actions, feelings and struggles more easily.

One unintended outcome of the choice of MCC churches as research sites was that all the volunteer interview participants were from Protestant backgrounds. MCC congregations are ecumenical but congregants tend to cluster according to their religious upbringing, and that of the most influential pastor in the congregation. I was not aware initially that the Catholic MCC members mostly attend a third MCC church in western Sydney, or that LGBT Catholics attend a breakaway Catholic group, Acceptance (Gay Catholic 2012). By the time I became aware of this I had already committed to the research in the four congregations. I

was also reluctant to become involved in study of a Catholic organisation due to my limited understanding and experience of the Catholic Church and doctrine. Further studies could be carried out to investigate any difference in the experience of Protestant or Catholic LGBT Christians. Due to the major protestant premise that God may be accessed personally rather than through a mediator as in the Catholic Church (Russell 2013), it may be that those from a Protestant background are more concerned with 'biblical truths' than those from Catholic backgrounds, and face slightly different challenges.

The use of CAQDA is also contested. Richards and Richards (1987) argue that CAQDA goes far beyond the capacity of manual coding and allows for greater volume, complexity, detail and flexibility, which according to them increases validity of coding and reliability and transparency of the analysis process. These criteria for good research stem from the positivist tradition of research (Creswell 2013). They maintain this is imperative for the methodological integrity of qualitative research. On the other hand some researchers who are informed by constructionism and postmodernism maintain good research is based upon the richness and complexity of data obtained, which often has an imaginative subjective element. Coffey et al. (in Seale 1999) caution that exclusive use of CAQDA can be constraining, and lead to mechanical analysis of data which may restrict imaginative processes.

I experienced working with NVivo as useful for retrieval but at times fragmented, as coded quotations were isolated from the contextual detail. I am of the opinion that the coding process of qualitative data always contains an element of subjectivity and creativity, and I acknowledge that the individual and context-based actions and interactions under scrutiny are also dynamic, fleeting and shifting. What may be 'true' today may not apply to 'tomorrow'. Should I repeat my data analysis, I am not convinced I would come to the same conclusions as in the following chapters. After all, I as researcher am not the same person as the one who

entered the research process. I therefore lean toward the postmodern in the epistemological tension between positivist and postmodern traditions (Ezzy 2002).

Ethical Requirements and Considerations

I gained ethical approval for the project from the University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (Ref: H0012415). I submitted justification for the project in terms of benefit to those being researched and what measures I would take to protect the participants and myself from physical and emotional risks and potential harm. First I proposed that, in conjunction with the pastors of each congregation, I would introduce my study and be available for interested potential interviewees to approach me. In addition I had received permission to recruit through snowball sampling and through the distribution of flyers. I provided those interested in participating in an interview with information sheets outlining the aims and procedure of the study, together with consent forms. I did not proceed with an interview unless informed consent was given, and prior to the interviews I ensured the participants understood both the information sheet and the consent form.

The risks associated with the research were minimal and I emphasised these before conducting the interview. Although I refrained from discussing particularly sensitive issues, the content of the interviews was unavoidably delicate at times, making it possible that when reflecting on their experiences, participants become upset or angry. I emphasised that participants were free to discontinue discussing a particular theme, and reminded them they were free to terminate the interview if they wished (Creswell 2013). I also provided participants with phone numbers of counselling services should they feel the need to discuss any issues that arise. These risks were mitigated by the fact that most of the participants were

strongly integrated into supportive peer groups. The most at risk were the transgender participants, who both expressed how they remain vulnerable on the margins of any group.

In the fieldwork, at no time did I present myself as anything other than an interested and sympathetic researcher. I also made the provision that if at any time anyone objected to my presence I would not return to that congregation. There was no active concealment or planned deception, and during the events I took no notes and taped no conversations, other than the formal interviews.

Anonymity and confidentiality were assured (Babbie 2011) by using pseudonyms throughout the research. However, the possibility remains of participants being identified through the research data collected, in particular the ministers. This possibility was aired when requesting an interview and was included in the information sheet and statements of consent. Any identifying details of the congregants, however, were not referred to in the study/report and comments were only made in very general terms (Babbie 2011); for example, 'a woman from one of the church communities was rejected by her family because of her sexuality'. As warranted by the formal ethical requirements, information connecting the pseudonym with the individual is being stored in a locked filing cabinet, separate from the collected data. Identifying details are stored on a password-protected hard drive and will be destroyed as soon as the data has been collected and any follow-up with participants has been concluded. Any potentially identifying information will be changed to protect the participant's identity. In some cases confidentiality will be achieved by aggregating data (Creswell 2013).

The ethical considerations of this study, however, went far beyond fulfilling the requirements of the HREC. Being a study of religious experience which included participation in services and other activities, I had prepared myself, aware that there were potential ethical issues and

challenges. I had been cautioned about the challenge of representation, in that there has been a tendency for religious belief to be reduced to the outcome of other social factors such as class, race and ethnicity (Smith 2003). I entered the field with respect towards the belief of others. The second issue is that of research in general: how can this research be justified in terms of benefit for those being researched? While I felt confident of this, it was not always obvious to the participants. These and other challenges were far more critical and emotionally challenging than I had expected.

Moreover, of ethical and methodological importance, was the feeling of unease that grew in me during the life of the fieldwork, that I needed to approach the study from an experiential point of view, rather than a purely cognitive one. My study had morphed from an observational exercise of an outsider into one where I, at least for a time, was the central figure – I became my own informant, an expression borrowed from Salomonson (2004) in her reflective article based upon her study on paganism. In order to fulfil my ethical responsibility of representing the emotional experiential aspect of the ‘Other’, I needed to take my own experiences seriously.

Chapter 4.2: Walking the Fine Line: A Reflexive Account

Enhancing Rigour, Moral Dilemmas and Representing the ‘Other’

This chapter critically reflects on my experience and practice as a researcher. I place ‘moral issues on the table’ and ‘to reveal hidden-from-view’ areas of research (Goodwin et al. 2003: 568). While fieldwork is fraught with unexpected ethical and methodological issues (Quinlan 2008), the religious nature of this project added a further dimension of complexity, that of representation of religious belief (Bromley and Carter 2001; Zablocki 2001).

My experience during the research is also of interest in its effect on the construction of knowledge. In order to highlight the backdrop and active input of the participants, I have written in as much detail how I contributed to the construction of knowledge. Rather than integrating these experiences in the field into the first part of the chapter, I made the choice to separate my reflexive account in order to focus more fully upon it. The following section based upon the fieldwork outlines many of the ethical and methodological issues I confronted, particularly in relation to the emic/etic boundary and the tensions I experienced ‘walking the fine line’, between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ in the field. This section of the chapter, in the form of a reflexive series of ‘confessional tales’ (van Maanen 1988: 73), aims to use the experiences in the field to tease out the ethical and methodological dilemmas of the fieldwork stage of my research project. It also builds upon these experiences to develop a richer understanding of the group under study, to ‘describe and analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience’ (Ellis et al. 2011: 1). It is thus both the doing of fieldwork, and the production of knowledge from the experiences, as perceived by the researcher.

The following reflexive anecdotes are based upon experiences in services, social events after services and other private interactions with members of congregations. The ethical integrity of the researcher and the safety of both researcher and the researched are addressed in the formal process of ethics approval; however, the nature of fieldwork requires flexibility in making unexpected moral and ethical judgements (Goodwin et al. 2003; Quinlan 2008) which go far beyond the formal processes. As such, I could not anticipate the complexity of dealing with the sensibilities of individuals and groups in my study, particularly those who have been either vilified for their existence, or relegated to invisibility, in addition to my own moral dilemmas and identity issues. I discuss these experiences under the following headings: Insider/Outsider, including Participant/Observer; Power Balance; Production of Knowledge; and Deceiving/Being Deceived.

Insider/Outsider

Gender, sexuality and Christianity – Constructs of self

As a same-sex attracted woman with a tenuous connection to Christianity – my previous membership of a fundamental Christian group I was entering the field as both ‘one of us’ and ‘not of us’. This was starkly illustrated as I was introduced to the Metropolitan Community Church 1 (MCC1) morning service by the pastor as ‘a member of our community’ in terms of sexuality, but not, as in the case of a fellow researcher who coincidentally was visiting that same week, the honour of ‘being a good Christian’. I found out later that this fellow researcher had the additional honour of being male! As I stood afterwards awkwardly drinking coffee and waiting for potential interviewees to flood toward me, I realised there was a lot of suspicion despite the pastor’s reassurances to the congregation that we were ‘kosher’. As I chatted to one man, his partner rushed up and shepherded him away, throwing

me an almost hostile glance. Eventually one woman volunteered interest and explained that the other researcher, being a man, would be ideal to interview the men, and I the women. I found this clear dichotomous gendering surprising and somewhat ironic considering the marginalised nature of the congregation. In addition, given the demographic of the congregation (three-quarters being male), the opportunities for finding interview participants were limited.

I realised that, at least in part, my gender explained the hostility and indifference. This cool welcome alerted me to the fact that although part of the group in terms of my sexuality, I was definitely struggling with a complex mix of social, religious and gendered identifications. Over the four visits to this traditional morning service I found I was better able to communicate with women in this congregation. Besides the male pastor and two other men who showed interest but eventually decided against participation, I was only able to interview women. Upon reflection I can attribute this both to my reticence and also to the discomfort felt with (or hostility toward) women, by some of the mostly older male congregation. Why I should be surprised is probably more surprising, given the often uneasy relationship between gay men and lesbian women (Jeffreys 2003), more specifically an issue which has been identified within the MCC worldwide (Primiano 1993; Sumerau 2012).

Another issue relating to my insider/outsider status was my ambiguous religious identity. Although I was aware of my ambivalence toward Christianity, it was only as fieldwork progressed that this came starkly into focus. I began to realise the resistance I felt to the patriarchal definition of God, of Jesus, of the need to worship and believe in these patriarchal entities to be saved. As I understood, not only are the central figures patriarchal, but the structure of salvation patriarchal and hierarchical. The fine line I was treading was highlighted during women's meetings. No longer was my sexuality or gender an issue, in

fact much of the time I enjoyed and felt quite comfortable based upon these commonalities and shared assumptions. However, my outsider status as a Christian-sceptic (although sympathetic) emerged, often suddenly and unexpectedly, as the following episode demonstrates.

I had engaged in a long conversation with Maria⁸ who shared many intimate details of her life, and we had prepared a date to meet again for the formal interview. Upon arriving at her partner's house, her partner and I were chatting about the goddess, paganism and feminism. Suddenly Maria looked up aghast, exclaiming, 'but aren't you Christian?!' While I had disclosed my connection with a quasi-Christian religious group and my ambivalence toward Christianity during the drive and the retreat, the sudden realisation that I was not a committed Christian was a shock to her, a shock which bordered on a feeling of betrayal. I in turn felt devastated that possibly I had committed the cardinal sin of deception, and had represented myself falsely, although I had endeavoured to be as open and upfront as possible. Throughout the activities with the women I had participated willingly, enjoying these which were of a general spiritual nature. Perhaps my participation had led her to assume I was more committed to Christianity than I was. Through this I could recognise the importance for her of a Christian identity, an identity that appeared far more significant than I had imagined, and seemingly more essential than identification with same-sex attraction. While this added to my cognitive understanding of the participants' experience, it exposed both my naivety in underestimating the importance of this distinction, and made me aware of my distance from understanding their experience.

The importance of a Christian identity was further reinforced during an interview with Nickie, a middle-aged woman from MCC3. She and I were chatting about religion and me

⁸ Pseudonyms are used throughout.

having a partner who is not religious, when Nickie commented that ‘it must be difficult to have a partner who is not Christian’. Once more I was challenged to reflect both upon how I was projecting myself, how the members of the congregations and interviewees viewed me and the depth of meaning for those who identified as Christian, which highlighted the developing chasm between us. The tension I felt as I negotiated an environment in which I was not entirely comfortable escalated after these incidents and was evident throughout the time I spent in the field. The below excerpts are diary entries I made, reflecting upon the time in the field:

How do I feel? Well, a bit like an intruder, a little inauthentic – I am not a real Christian. But I have always said that from the beginning. I took part in many activities, some were very engaging. I had some interesting conversations – especially with Angela, a straight woman who was becoming an MCC pastor – some mention was made by a few participants that they would really prefer a non-straight pastor – not directly to Angela but in a group session. I enjoyed the prayer stations and the inclusivity of the sessions was remarkable, most especially the communion. This was the first time I partook, much to the surprise of Roberta who I told (that I hadn’t previously done communion). I think that exposed me really, when I said it was my first time! I felt somewhat awkward the whole time. The most friendly were the women from M. We chatted one evening which was really enjoyable. I felt like a fraud with many others. I felt a lot of the women weren’t welcoming, but were enjoying each other’s company. I was surprised at the suspicion I felt from many ... I didn’t realise how others take it very seriously whether I am a Christian or not. Even more than the fact I am a member of LGBT community.

This extract illustrates the dilemma in which I found myself, and is discussed further in the next section, ‘Participant/observer’. Briefly, while I endeavoured to participate in the unfamiliar territory of Christian performative ritual, I was caught in an ethical quandary. As

discussed by Quinlan (2008), by adhering to the norms of the group with the desire to begin to understand the common experience of the 'Other', I was seeking to merge with the group. This I believed could only be accomplished through participating and observing, seeking a sort of 'invisibility', an invisibility that was glaringly 'conspicuous' (to borrow Quinlan's (2008: 1496) term, 'conspicuous invisibility'. While my empathy lay clearly with the group of people I was venturing to represent, through reporting and describing their experience as closely representative as possible, my status as an outsider meant that my involvement was at times viewed with suspicion, which lay heavily upon me. This distrust is one illustration of the general distrust of outsiders; in particular those investigating the religious experience of marginalised groups (Goldman 2001).

In retrospect I now recognise that my feminist leanings had been in battle with the Christian premise of salvation the whole time I engaged in the shared religious activities. Despite being able to construct these activities in a way that was intelligible to me, my understanding was most probably distant from the general shared understanding. Additionally, as expressed in the excerpt below from my pre-fieldwork diary, this struggle possibly led me to doing and being exactly the person I so disliked:

I have a potential conflict, in that I am intending to visit Christian churches and actually don't like them. I don't like the emphasis on God (male) and Jesus (male) and all the discourse and masculinity that follows: The right and wrong, the good and bad, the love and hate, the man and woman. By assuming God is perfect and Jesus is his perfect son, a polarising process is begun with its associated judgement. However, paradoxically [through] this belief [understanding of Christianity] that I have – that all is polarised – and therefore judgemental – I am in jeopardy of being judgemental.

My 'judgemental stance', which I tried so hard to avoid and ignore, increasingly created a barrier between myself and those I was researching. As pointed out by Zablocki (2001), the ethical issue of being judgemental can have methodological consequences, such as impeding the ability to understand the shared meanings of the other. For this reason Leathem (2001) advocates that religious research should be undertaken by researchers with identical or at least similar religious identification. On the other hand, researching as an outsider offers the benefit of being able to see differences that would be normally taken-for-granted (Rubin and Rubin 1995).

Participant/Observer

The previously described issues of representation, identity and trust are heightened when the nebulous religious experience and belief is under scrutiny (Zablocki 2001; Tosh 2001). The tension was manifested between me as an observer/researcher and those being observed. As already described, mistrust was occasionally displayed toward me as an outsider, in particular that I would not represent religious belief with respect, despite my reassurances, and that my participation was insincere. These tensions were not always expressed negatively, but the perception of my position was clearly made apparent to me. Early on in the study after attending the service in MCC3 to introduce myself, I was chatting to a congregant, when suddenly I was approached by another man who stated loudly that, 'either you are a reporter or a lecturer of theology'! He was far from hostile and endeavoured to ply me with books to read and other sources of information. I was naively taken aback at the ease with which he identified me as an observer. So much for my invisibility!

A second site of tension in being a participant/observer was within myself, a tension I found particularly difficult to negotiate. There was a point where I decided that I could observe no

longer. I had long refrained from writing notes and eventually stopped looking around the congregations. I would close my eyes for periods during each service, immerse myself in the moment, particularly in the singing of hymns I found familiar from my youth in school assemblies (a mini variation of a Quaker service). With these I found a particular connection which resonated with my sense of self as spiritual. My determination was to ‘purely’ participate and ‘feel’ in the search for the common ‘religious experience’. This experience highlighted for me that knowledge is embodied, and that religious experience is deeply imbued with emotion. Passages from my diary illustrate the point at which I began to question observation as a way of understanding:

That is the only way to understand, and to be able to describe – I still cannot pin down how I am to do this methodologically. Maybe I am only going to be able to describe the experience through feeling it myself – I feel the heart when I think of Ruth (a participant) – maybe I feel god through her. I think of the Philippines all those years back and how I felt I was a melting, but stubborn iceberg, large, cold and white. How the feeling of communion from the heart almost as a physical and visible energy became the way of communication. I often think of the paper⁹ I read years back in D’s qualitative course – the one about the head hunters and how he [the field worker] couldn’t understand till he lost his wife, then the other¹⁰ about the African tribes where the researcher couldn’t understand till she experienced the magic. There is a growing hunger to understand – to feel what they feel, in a way I look forward to Sunday, not dread it. I think again about the book [Bromley and Carter 2001] and tales of research into religion; the need to be ready to be converted.

⁹ Rosaldo (1993) Chapter 1 from “Culture and Truth”.

¹⁰ Turner, Edith (1994) A Visible Spirit Form in Zambia. in Young and Goulet (eds) *Being Changed: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience*. New York: Broadview Press.

I had moved from the position of being an outsider/observer of others, to being an insider, the subject of my own observation. This resonates with the school of thought that understands the need to take religious belief and experience seriously (Rosaldo 1993; Salomonson 2004). Participant observation positions the researcher as an outsider, looking in, which while a necessary part of the research process is not enough to truly ‘hear the other’ (Salomonson 2004: 50). Salomonson advocates a ‘method of compassion’ using the phrase to mean attempting to understand the other both cognitively and emotionally. With religious belief it would mean the openness that the religious experience may have something to offer the researcher.

Power Balance

Power in relationships

The above discussions of insider/outsider and participant/observer lead into issues of power and knowledge, which are discussed further in this section. Feminist and postmodern sensibilities emphasise the issue of power in fieldwork in two main areas: power in the field, both through the characteristics of the researcher in relationship to the researched, and power exerted during the process of research and how it is constructed (Wolf 1996; Adams 1999). A second area of contestation is power in the production of knowledge (Adams 1999). Adams argues that the researcher–researched relationship is ‘inherently exploitative’ (Adams 1999: 332), and while the production of knowledge may remain an irreconcilable tension due to the pressures of remaining within the confines of academia (Wolf 1996), my experience indicated that within the field, power relationships are far more unpredictable and are constantly being negotiated.

Power can be exerted in relationships when the individuals being researched are in a marginalised position in relation to the researcher (Fontes 1998). While the individuals in this study are marginalised due to their same-sex attraction and religious beliefs¹¹, their often close-knit membership of supporting congregations mitigated their vulnerability. I as a researcher, while being an outsider in terms of commitment to Christianity, shared many other characteristics of the group, thus diminishing much of the possible power imbalance (Wolf 1996). Within the congregations most, though not all, congregants were of Anglo-Australian background, all but one spoke English as their first language, and age varied from 18–80 (the average age, for example, of the interviewees was 50). The social characteristics of the key informants and the volunteer interviewees were close to my own, which is not surprising as these individuals were those who felt more comfortable to volunteer. All key informants and all interviewees identified as middle class. All the key informants held postgraduate qualifications, and of the interviewees all except two had finished one or more university degrees, with approximately 80 per cent holding postgraduate qualifications of some sort. According to Wolf (1996: 7), ‘studying up’ (researching those with higher educational qualifications than the researcher) subverts the imbalance of power often associated with the researcher and researched. Education has long been recognised by sociologists, in particular Bourdieu (1977), to be a source of social inequality, with education conferring social privilege and individual self-esteem on those with higher qualifications (Pakulski 2004).

Despite these mitigating factors, there were negotiations of power, in particular in the relationships I formed with the key informants, which highlighted not only the vulnerability of the researched, but that of the researcher (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000a). A few

¹¹ Marginalised within Christianity and often marginalised within the wider LGBTQ community.

particularly revealing incidents in the field are outlined below. Being acutely sensitive to the need to represent as accurately and sincerely as possible the experience of the LGBT Christians and not to abuse the welcome I was given, I remained as flexible as possible when negotiating with the pastors on how to present my project. The first pastor was cordial and supportive of my project as I discussed its aims and my intentions. I had the distinct impression I was being vetted – which was totally reasonable given the marginalised nature of the congregation and the harm that had previously been done by researchers to its image (Rodriguez 2009). I expressed the desire to present my study and call for volunteers before or after the first service in each congregation, and although this request was acknowledged and I prepared a welcome speech, the pastor himself introduced the study to the congregation. While he gave the project ‘legitimation’, he did not clarify my desire to conduct interviews with members of the congregation, only that I would be chatting during the social tea, coffee and cake meeting after the service. Feeling extremely vulnerable and disempowered I struggled to explain my presence to individuals after the service.

In this case the power definitely lay with the pastor who intervened to ‘protect his flock’, and retain control of the situation. While he was fully supportive, it was clear that at the time of interviews he was cognisant of whom I was interviewing, and where I was meeting. The relationship of power in this case was more one between pastor and the members of the congregation. Although I endeavoured to bypass this, the intimacy within congregations was such that I had little or no power to do this. Adams (1999) describes how fieldwork roles are often negotiated, and in this case I had ‘signed the guest contract’ where my ‘freedom had been traded for protection’ (Adams 1999: 341) or in this case for admittance and access to the congregants. My freedom to question the women's role (or lack of it) in the MCC1, for example, had been severely restricted, both for fear of raising the ire of the pastor, and for alienating the congregants. In this way my search for the experience of the ‘Other’,

particularly some of the women, had been compromised, a compromise I was willing to take for the sake of maintaining an attitude of respect towards the hospitality I was shown.

The formation of friendships is another contested area of qualitative research (Duncombe and Jessop 2002). While on one hand feminist and post-structuralist understandings of relationality and identity conclude that friendships are not a sign of methodological dysfunctionality (Joseph 1996), there is consensus that they do raise ethical dilemmas (Duncombe and Jessop 2002: 107). Duncombe and Jessop describe forming friendships in research as uncomfortably close to 'doing rapport' and 'faking friendship'. While I felt genuinely empathetic to the people I was spending time with, I found through the study that the friendships I formed were tenuous, and suffered from dynamics of power and struggles that arose from me trying to balance the role of researcher with that of trusted friend (Adams 1999). The following anecdote illustrates some of the difficulties in engaging emotionally with participants, which while done with good intentions, left me feeling extremely uncomfortable and aware of the tenuous nature of the relationship. It also shows, conversely, the agency expressed by the participants themselves, that the engagement is two-way and that power is negotiated.

Upon my initial visit to MCC2, I was greeted enthusiastically by a lay member of the congregation, Emma. Emma gave me time to introduce my study to the congregation and expressed willingness to take part in my study. She understood that I was 'on the rebound' spiritually and most probably was interested in my 'rehabilitation'. We (my partner had joined me) agreed upon a date for her and her partner to be interviewed, at 7.00pm one evening at her place. We turned up, having just quickly grabbed some greasy fast food, to be met by the couple at the door, the table set and candles flickering behind them. Masking our surprise we enjoyed a lovely meal with much animated conversation over a bottle of red

wine. Not being able to eat too much, I eventually confessed to the misunderstanding, much to the merriment of all. I moved with Emma to another room and conducted the interview, which was uneventful, but satisfactory.

As there was no time for the second interview with her partner who had expressed interest, we agreed I would contact them at a future date, upon my return to Sydney. That was the last contact we had. I emailed to arrange an interview upon my return and received no response. Upon my next visit neither was at the service although they were deeply involved in this congregation. I couldn't help but feel shocked and extremely emotionally vulnerable. My position, however, was that of researcher, and not of friend. For whatever reason there was a change of heart as far as the willingness of Emma's partner to take part, and my friendship perhaps had made it uncomfortable for them. Upon reflection it is clear to me that the building of trust between researcher and researched can only come over time, and is compromised by the ever-present 'need' of the researcher to achieve a result, to gain something from the participant. In addition, I could recognise the participant is not a passive agent and, as in this case, was able to exercise agency (Duncombe and Jessop 2002).

Power in production of knowledge

Related to the issue of power in relationships is the way in which my relationship with key informants influenced the production of knowledge, an issue of power that is often overlooked (Wolf 1996; Joseph 1996). A similar occurrence to that outlined above when introducing my study in MCC1, with a totally different outcome, took place in MCC3. I had met the woman pastor, Liz, previously and from the beginning I felt with her a 'kindred spirit'. She had always expressed total support and enthusiasm which was unchanged when I met her some weeks later before the service to introduce my study. We had agreed that I

would introduce my study and explain how I was looking for volunteers to take part in interviews. What transpired was totally unexpected. Apparently ‘moved by the spirit’, Liz took control, this time not of whom I would interview, but the direction of my study. With enthusiastic ardour she explained the need for a study such as mine, not only to tell the story of a marginalised group of individuals, but as a ‘pastoral tool’, an anthology that could be used to aid those who were struggling to reconcile their sexuality and Christian beliefs. Somewhat taken aback, I quickly adapted to this change of tack, and decided not only to present a report of my findings to each interviewee and congregation, but to fulfil her newly created project, an anthology of experiences. Through interaction and the relationship I had formed, the project had taken on new life. Admittedly I retain control and power in how I reproduce the data but the seeds have been sown for a new creation – one to which I cannot claim sole authorship. Her ardour had results and within this congregation volunteers came forward, interestingly with little gender bias.

Although this example is somewhat extreme in that my external production of knowledge was altered (or at least extended), production of knowledge is more often influenced in more subtle and nuanced ways. The relationships I formed with key informants and other individuals coloured my understandings of the congregations and subtly guided my apprehension of the themes that appeared important to focus upon and develop. While traditionally forming friendships was seen as a methodological flaw in the research process (Joseph 1996; Angrosino and Rosenberg 2013), as pointed out by both feminist and postmodern methodologists, not only is data a co-constructed project, the production of knowledge and conclusions cannot be divorced from the characteristics of the researcher (Angrosino and Rosenberg 2013) and the relationships that were formed in the field (Adams 1999). I will focus not upon the findings (these are detailed in subsequent chapters) but a few examples of how the relationships I formed informed the construction of knowledge.

First, as a consequence of the relationships I formed with the key informant of each congregation, the gender balance of the interviewees was affected. Despite the predominance of men in MCC congregations, I was able to conduct interviews with only 10 men, as compared with 16 women and two transgendered individuals. Only one man (the pastor) volunteered to be interviewed in MCC1. Gender was conspicuous as a social characteristic that coloured the relationships in the field with the key informants in particular, and subsequently influenced the gender balance of the interviewees. This was also instructive in the construction and understandings of gender within each congregation.

The warmth of the reception in MCC3 contrasted strongly with the reception in the other congregations. Consequently, not only were interviewees willing, easy to recruit and positive toward the study in this congregation, but my experience within the services was altered. No longer was I incessantly questioning my value as a researcher, my ethics and my integrity. What was interesting is that I could relax and enjoy the services, which is indicative of the assertion that identity is not purely individualistic, but is relational (Joseph 1996). I also now feel free to return and work toward a secondary co-creation of the data for the purposes of the congregation.

One ethical and methodological issue tied in with production of knowledge, proposed by Zablocki (2001) is that of deceiving, and of being deceived. The risk of deceiving the congregations has been touched upon above. The risk of being deceived by organisations is real, and is relevant to the section on production of knowledge. Throughout my fieldwork I saw, was told of and heard of many ‘acts of heroism’ (Zablocki 2001: 238). I was moved by the many tales of an unfair struggle against an uncaring and unresponsive world, and of how in most cases the battle was won through acts of faith, of love and of perseverance, as expressed in these excerpts from my field diary:

I think of Ruth [a participant] and what she has come to mean to me ... and as lay awake ... I think of Luke, his pain, his mixed gender, his struggle; of Rebecca's pain; of Angela's heart-felt love of God and spirit.

Their journeys are heroic, and in no way do I feel I was deceived. However, the empathy I felt was at times overwhelming, which I recognise could lead to disregarding or underplaying other less heroic acts such as power struggles, faction building or individual acts of unkindness or aggression (Quinlan 2006). However, the production of knowledge is informed by the relationships that developed and the stories I heard. Rigour can be enhanced by articulating my standpoint, and claims to truth.

The final issue, well documented and debated, is the issue of power in the use of information gleaned from the field, whether it be through participation, observation, conversations or formal interviews (Wolf 1996; Goodwin et al. 2003). Despite being an empathetic researcher, as opposed to remaining a distant and aloof, how I represent the community and individuals under study is entirely my responsibility. Academia sets parameters around expression and content (Wolf 1996), so power in this aspect of research remains with me. The responsibility of how to use the sometimes deeply personal details willingly shared requires much reflection and serious thought. When at times I felt like giving up due to varying levels of discomfort or lack of self-confidence, I was reminded that the participants had shared of themselves, leaving me with no choice but to continue.

Second, the issue of representation is particularly pertinent when representing religious and spiritual experience. Tosh (2001) describes the complex insider/outsider relationship travelling between the field (pagan world) and the office (university). She was accused of 'going native' by many scholars yet, as she explained, it was through her deep immersion in the field she could gain insights inaccessible to an outsider. The problem of representation

within the religious field is generic; sociology has traditionally represented religious experience in terms of other social parameters (Smith 2003). I agree with Smith that religious experience cannot be ‘explained away’ and just ‘is’. By attempting to employ non-reductionist thinking, the limits of how I as a scholar can represent the participants’ religious experience are revealed. I can try, however, to describe the experience in terms of meaning for the participants and the social effects of the religious experience upon their lives.

Finally, related to production of knowledge and representation, I, as a researcher in the field ask whether I have done any good, or whether I have unintentionally caused harm, or more accurately if/when harm was caused, whether this was outweighed by the good and potential good that has been done. These questions remain at the heart of all research, particularly ethnographic and qualitative research and in the last two decades have been discussed at length. Problems such as those discussed above are addressed by Magolda and Weems (2002), who offer a series of cautionary tales to researchers as a way of foretelling potential risks of harm, in order to counteract these where possible. The question is how can qualitative researchers conduct highly individualised research projects, become deeply involved in the subjects’ worlds (more recently referred to as ‘active partners’ (Angrosino and Rosenberg 2013: 152) and minimise harmful effects.

My response to this, after completing the fieldwork stage, is in the writing of the research and the dissemination both within and without academia. The above autobiographical account indicates that there were moments of risk and occasions where members of the congregations were unsettled or felt discomfort, but I can confidently say no harm was caused, despite the moments of discomfort. The outcome, it is hoped, will be a contribution to not only academic knowledge, but a step towards greater understanding of a marginalised group, the way in which inequality is reproduced, and thus a contribution toward greater social justice.

Throughout the fieldwork I found I needed to return to my initial motivation in order to override the ethical dilemmas I faced:

Really I am not here to gain from the services however, am I being deceitful by being there to grab people or am I being there to absorb the service, observe the activities and maybe immerse myself in my study? I need to go back to my motivation for being here – to let people tell their story and to gain an understanding of their journey.

The desire to be true to the original motivation for the study, in this case a social justice issue, is key to whether the study becomes meaningful and whether any harm done can be justified. The responsibility lies with the individual researcher, not only by adhering to institutional ethical requirements, but in field research as above, by maintaining transparency in the research process, in analysis and in interpretation of the data given so willingly by participants. Perhaps self-revelatory stories as this can contribute toward a more ethical approach to social research.

There were a number of positive outcomes from the field work and interviews. Several participants reflected after the interviews, expressing how they felt something had changed through the interview process. Arthur, for example, explains, 'I think something that has become more apparent through this process (interview) is how much Troy Perry meant to my understanding of sexuality and Christianity. Yes, I knew it helped me to become more open and more aware, but now it is obvious that was quite pivotal in my experience of wholeness'. Similarly one participant, Nickie, who had experienced deep internal conflict on account of her same-sex attraction up until the interview, wrote a letter to me some months after explaining how she had now reached a state of greater inner peace. While she didn't explicitly contribute responsibility to the interview process, she expressed her gratitude and

that it was a meaningful occurrence for her, supporting the positive assertion that interviews can be cathartic (Ezzy 2010). Fontana and Prokos (2007: 54) describe how interviews can create ‘epiphanies ... interactional moments that leave marks on people’s lives’ which in themselves can be transformational.

As a feminist researcher with empathy for the participants and a somewhat political agenda, as a same-sex attracted older woman, not situated within the confines of Christianity, I present myself as a subjective entity that has had an impact upon the field in which I work, and am unashamed that the field has had an impact upon me. Far from attempting to remain aloof and objective, I involved myself emotionally in the field. Despite the ethical and methodological dilemmas, of which some are described above, I was committed to representing the sensibilities and understandings of the members of the congregations, and the individual interviewees as accurately and validly as I could. I hope that, as much as I place myself in the foreground in this thesis, the experience of the participants and those they represent can be illustrated, highlighted and made public, not only in academia but in general social circles. An aspect of the political agenda I wish to pursue is that I wish to ‘name’ the existence of LGBT Christians acknowledging their legitimacy, their legitimate endeavour to recognition, and their specific aggregate contribution to the body of Christianity.

This chapter outlining methodology, methods and finally the reflexive field account situate the study, and the analysis of the findings that are generated. The following five chapters present the data, intertwined with discussion and analysis. The first is primarily descriptive, providing a backdrop that both informs and is informed by the individuals who actively participated in the study through formal interviews. This backdrop for 26 of the 28 interviewees is the United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC), more specifically three churches in Australia – the MCC1, MCC2, and MCC3 (four

congregations). The experience of the MCC denominations, being affirming of diverse sexualities, is compared with the experience of the two remaining interviewees who attended the open but not affirming United Church in Australia.

The description uses data taken from various sources. First I draw upon knowledge gained through academic and institutional sources. To add nuance I include some descriptive data taken from interviews with the pastors and congregants as they express what the MCC means to them, and how they view interactions both within and between congregants and congregations. In addition I draw on data obtained through the participant observational element of the project. As an observer I describe external uses and arrangements of space, external interactional behaviours and performatives such as rituals. As a participant I draw on experiential data and subjective emotions and feelings as I engage in the services and interacted informally. I paint a detailed picture of the heterogeneous environment that is the MCC.

Chapter 5: Experiencing the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches

There are three notions embodied in MCC ritual. First, God's grace is radically inclusive and without conditions. Second, no one is turned away, for the table is open. Hospitality supersedes all denominational politics of the table. Finally open invitation expresses a central practice of Jesus' ministry that every person is loved equally by God. Combined this ritual invitation would become the core mission of MCC: God's radical inclusive love (Shore-Goss 2013: 3).

We held hands and we took communion together in front of a minister of God who said, 'You are accepted, you are forgiven, and you are loved'. I had tears running down my face, a lump in my throat and I just felt, 'I'm home'. This is where I want to be. This is what I've been searching for. This is what has been missing in my life as a good person (Laura, congregant MCC1).

Introduction

The above quotes illustrate how the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC)¹² core mission of 'radical inclusive love' is experienced by one congregant, Laura. Laura expresses unequivocally the immense importance of her congregation. She also describes the empowering nature of ritual, of performative and repetitive practice and its contribution to the sense of self, of belonging and of acceptance. In this study the majority of the interviewees (n=26) attended Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) congregations. It was also within three MCC churches that I conducted the

¹² The worldwide association of Metropolitan Community Churches. When referring to specific churches and congregations the shorter acronym MCC is used.

participant observational element of the study. The experience of participants varied but the majority overwhelmingly express its value and importance to them. I argue that the practices within the safe spaces of the MCC congregations enable the creation of new symbolic capital that endows legitimacy on the participants' sexuality and religiosity. This in turn transforms religious habitus, further encouraging individuals to live as authentic Christians.

The UFMCC as an institution is multi-faceted and complex. It varies from country to country and in Australia from state to state. For example, within Sydney there are three MCCs that offer a totally different experience to the congregants. In this chapter I provide a descriptive account of these diverse yet fundamentally connected spaces within which the study was carried out. They are the backdrop that both informs and is informed by the individuals who actively participated in the study through formal interviews. I first provide some historical background to and information about the MCC, both worldwide and in Australia, including a description of the MCC's response to diverse sexualities and gender. I then briefly discuss the ecumenical nature of the church, and the role of the church in the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) Christians, touching on tensions that exist within the denomination in Australia. The diversity within the MCC denominations is outlined in a table and discussed briefly. I finally describe the subjective experience of the MCC, and the meaning that MCC has for congregants.

Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches

A year before the Stonewall Riot (1969), one minister, Troy Perry, received the revelation to begin a ministry to enable LGBT Christians a safe space within which to worship. Perry, who had been defrocked as a Pentecostal minister on revealing his same-sex-attraction, conducted the first service in a small room in Los Angeles on 6 October 1968 (Shore-Goss

2013). From these humble beginnings emerged the largest LGBT-affirming denomination in the world, where upwards of 200,000 people attend 222 congregations in 37 countries each year (MCC North London, n.d.)

Due to the need to provide a safe space to worship for Christians of all backgrounds, this organisation is an ecumenical, post-modern, eclectic mix of different worship traditions. It maintains, therefore, an inherent flexibility in its expression of religious practice which tailors itself to each specific congregation, and each congregation attracts people according to their upbringing or religious world view (Perry and Swicegood 1990; Wilcox 2003). While the religious practices of the UFMCC vary according to both the congregation and the minister, behind this flexibility the UFMCC is united in fundamental and orthodox theological principles based upon the Apostolic and Nicene creeds¹³, and four core values: inclusion, community, spiritual transformation and social action (MCC Denomination Core Values). According to the founder, it is committed to 'the three-pronged Gospel of Christian Salvation, Christian Community, and Christian Social Action' (MCC North London, n.d.). These underlying principles are the basis of religious and congregational practices that unite the varying congregations.

The denomination was initially formed, led and populated largely by homosexual men. In 1972 the first woman, Freda Smith, was ordained as an MCC minister, and since then the number of women involved in the MCC has steadily increased. Initially Smith fought for recognition of women and for the institutional inclusion of gender inclusive language. Currently the UFMCC moderator is a woman, Reverend Nancy Wilson, and at the time of writing women actually outnumber men in the ministry (51.5% women clergy), a fact bemoaned by one male member in the present study who maintains that the UFMCC is

¹³ The Apostolic and Nicene creeds state theological principles common to most mainstream Christian churches.

‘feminised’. This percentage is in part due to the AIDS epidemic in which many male UFMCC ministers and potential leaders died (Perry and Swicegood 1990). Membership is more difficult to assess. According to some sources, the gender proportion of membership is fairly even, whereas others maintain that there is a high proportion of men (Wilcox 2003). In Australia, according to my observation and reports from members, men outnumbered women, both within congregations and the ministry.

As an organisation that is committed to equality and diversity, the MCC practises institutional use of gender inclusive language in all hymns and other documents. Despite this there is a great variation in understandings of gender and the implementation of gendered understandings in roles and relations within each congregation, which at times indicates deep-seated tensions between the sexes. Research by Sumerau (2012: 461) at one MCC congregation in the US indicated that within the congregation he was studying men felt inherent privilege in relationships to God and Jesus, maintaining ‘paternal stewardship’ and valuing highly what they understood as masculine characteristics of emotional control and rationality. While my observations and interviews revealed no such extreme tendencies, there were some overt practices and covert attitudes that reproduced traditional patriarchal understandings of gender. Occasionally tensions were expressed in the interviews. This is discussed more fully in later chapters.

The Ecumenical MCC in Australia – The Place and the People

There are presently five MCC churches in Australia: three in Sydney, one in Brisbane and one in Melbourne. Due to the ecumenical nature of the UFMCC, and the eclectic mix of congregation members, each has developed its own characteristics. This became evident during my visits to each of the three churches (and four congregations) that were the focus of

my study, as outlined in Chapter 4. The congregational and religious practices are co-constructed between the minister and congregation which enables a dynamic development and the possibility of experimental change to the format of the services, theological emphasis and expression of worship. This dynamism is accompanied by tension and a state of flux, which at times creates instability. As one interviewee mentions, ‘So yes, it is a complex sort of place. You can understand why there is this fair bit of political things. I mean it happens everywhere you go but in MCC perhaps even more so possibly because of the complex backgrounds of everybody’.

Some of these tensions centre on theology and/or corresponding ritual practices given the diverse congregational backgrounds of members. I often heard criticisms of the congregations, which partly met the needs of participants and partly caused irritation or even disenfranchisement. The most common criticisms focus on worship style, with one participant noting of one congregation, ‘[it’s] more about rituals and liturgy than ... about Christianity’. Others comment on the fundamental purpose of MCC1 existence, ‘that some MCC1 were more about being gay than being Christian’; and others focus on age and gender, ‘that they were mainly the domain of older gay men ‘waving rainbow flags’.

Due to the varying theological emphases and worship practices adopted by the MCC, many LGBT Christians who participated in this study experimented with more than one congregation, moving until they found one that suited them. As Luke, one congregant of MCC2, says of his experience in the first MCC congregation he attended, ‘it’s an awful thing to say, but the truth for me, I felt that having to be part of MCC was really part of my punishment for being gay’. Upon finding a congregation that suited his form of worship his experience was transformed; ‘I think I rediscovered my Pentecostal spirituality ... and

worship for the first time in six or seven years ... I was absolutely flattened by it. It was like I had come home!’

Luke’s vivid depiction of the MCC, from a place of ‘punishment’ to ‘coming home’ indicates four main issues. First, it illustrates the intensity of the struggle some individuals experience. Second, connected to this, he illustrates the power of the individual religious habitus in both imparting fear and judgement, as well as instilling the importance of worship practices, in this case Pentecostalism. Third, he expresses the importance of a safe space to live an authentic spirituality. These issues are dealt with in chapters 6, 7 and 8. Finally it demonstrates the immense diversity within this denomination, and its strength in adapting to those from diverse religious backgrounds. However, paradoxically, from this strength emerges vulnerability. The denomination, precisely due to its being open to diversity with the resultant flexibility and fluidity of practice, is vulnerable to criticism and the ensuing development of factions. Through this study I was made aware of tensions, in particular when there was the perception that the needs of minority sub-groups were not adequately met. I do not describe such political tensions except in skeletal form, as most participants who confided details of these expressed the desire that I not include these in the study. It also was not the focus of my interest. However, underlying tensions in particular pertaining to gender and patriarchy within the institution of Christianity are discussed more fully in Chapter 9.

Those involved with the MCC in this study were mostly people with an intensely religious upbringing, where their religious habitus was deeply imbued in their identity. Religious practice was important to them. In line with Taylor (2007) who sees religious belief or unbelief as a default position, 26 of the 28 interview participants were brought up in an environment of belief. In addition individuals remained deeply connected to their specific

congregational upbringing – in particular to worship practices. As illustrated by Luke, for example, those who were brought up Pentecostal sought an MCC congregation that expressed a Pentecostal-like form of worship, and those who were brought up Catholic gravitated towards congregations with other disenfranchised Catholics. For this reason all the MCC congregations I visited varied according to the background of the congregants, which in this study was on the whole Protestant. While transformation of religious habitus did occur, it was quite specific – dealing with same-sex attraction. This is discussed in depth in chapters 6, 7 and 8.

Experiencing the MCC

I attended three MCC churches in Sydney and Melbourne. One church holds morning and evening services which are quite distinctive and are therefore discussed separately where appropriate. The following is a summary of attitudes and practices within these churches, MCC1, MCC2 and MCC3. I make a comparative description in terms of space, people, governance, congregational and worship practices. Given the complexity of the MCC and its diverse populations, I provide a comparative overview of hierarchal arrangements, religious practices and gendered interactions in Table 5.1 (p. 141).

In sketching this account of MCC I draw upon data from various sources: first, academic and institutional knowledge; second, to add nuance, interviews with the pastors and congregants as they express what the MCC means to them and how they view interactions both within and between congregants and congregations; third, data I obtained through the participant observational element of the project. As an observer I describe external uses and arrangements of space, external interactional behaviours and religious performatives such as

communion. As a participant I draw on experiential data and subjective emotions and feelings as I engaged in the services and interacted informally.

While participant observation added to understanding and interpreting the interview data and describing the experience of the LGBT Christians in these affirming congregations, I recognise I responded to the experience of each congregation based upon my own previous experiences. My own religious background is chequered. While I was brought up a non-believer, I attended a Quaker school in my later school years, which instilled in me a strong sense of egalitarianism in regard to the relationship between God, or a greater power, and human beings. I later became involved in an extremely conservative, patriarchal but eclectic religious institution (in which I am no longer involved). My impressions and observations thus were coloured. For example, my sensitivities were heightened to patriarchal undertones. Although I seek to describe the contextual backdrop of the participants whose interviews I later analyse, I recognise the subjective element as I contribute to this scenario. Neither do I claim to have an in-depth understanding of the MCC as a denomination, or profess intimate knowledge of the congregations I visited.

While there were great variations in congregational attributes, strikingly the interview participants invariably describe the MCC as a ‘safe haven.

Safe spaces – ‘Coming home’

Luke states (p. 135) that ‘it was like coming home!’ The participants consistently describe the MCC space as ‘home’ and the fellow congregants as ‘family’. Natalie expresses, ‘The first thing I really felt when I walked in there was this place is just like a really big family’. Anthea also explains, ‘I wanted to be in a church environment but I never really fitted in ... Here I can be myself, I feel extremely comfortable; this is my community ... I thought I’m

home'. Of the 26 participants in this study who attended MCC, the overwhelming majority describe the feeling of comfort and safety at finding 'home' and 'family'. A safe space 'like home' is critical in transformation of habitus. It provides a space within which emotional responses toward same-sex attraction can be transformed and relationships legitimised, as well as a space where doctrine can be discussed. The sense of coming home is complex (Sixsmith 1986: 287) but here the experience of 'belonging', of 'self-expression' and 'quality of relationship' predominate.

Belonging

The MCC policy of inclusivity is central to both the theological basis and the everyday practices of the MCC. Each individual is welcomed upon arrival at the services, fostering the sense of belonging. William speaks for the majority of the participants who attended all three MCC congregations: 'We felt welcomed as soon as [we] walked in the door, people come to you, welcome you ... I felt comfort in knowing we were all possibly of the same beliefs ... the welcoming and the fact you were in a safe group'. In most cases the welcome generates a sense of belonging, which is, according to Wise, Harris and Watts (2005), a dimension of habitus. Individuals meet others that are struggling through a very similar journey. As Luke explains, 'I mean almost everyone who comes to [MCC2] has the same story ... we are united in our narratives'. While the practice of welcoming congregants is not unique to the MCC, it is of particular importance in that it legitimates non-normative sexualities and enables LGBT people to practise their Christianity safely and to feel affirmed in regard to both their religious, sexual and gendered identities.

Self-expression and quality of relationships

For most the sense of coming home and being with ‘family’ is connected to the feeling of being able to ‘be me’; to express the authentic self. As Angela says, ‘it always felt like home, like there are real relationships, not just the talk of real relationships’. Judith also explains, ‘You can be who you are’. Others explain that the safety within the MCC spaces enables the resolution of conflicts of doctrine through non-threatening discussion. According to Emma, ‘I think a safe space where you can ask questions, and people are very happy to sit down with you and talk about those things and share their journey’. She adds that it is also ‘a place where you can worship freely and articulate what is meaningful for you’.

For the religious individuals in the study the safe place also enables the practice of meaningful, queer religious worship. Participants voice the need to ‘do’ their religion as a group, to perform the rituals repeatedly and to be recognised in front of God and in front of others. Luke, for example, expresses this need to worship together as invaluable to experience God’s presence: ‘to me [sic] is actually that experience of God’s presence is happening all the time but when you come together and you celebrate it, it’s intensified and it’s shared’. The queering of worship spaces and ritual practices was essential to the transformation of habitus.

The importance of this affirmation is illustrated by Nathan, who belongs to the Uniting Church – a liberal denomination which officially offers welcome to all, regardless of sexual orientation (The Uniting Church in Australia 2015). Nathan explains that the feeling of safety he feels in his congregation is tempered by its fragility: ‘I mean first of all, we [he and his partner] were just accepted as a couple like anyone else ... the group was really good’. While the chaplain and congregation of mostly young university students always welcome him, ‘there are some really conservative people [that have] kind of taken an issue with the

whole gender inclusive thing ... so we're in this situation that's kind of whoa ... if you have a problem with talking about God in gender neutral language, how are you going to feel about gay people?'. Nathan also describes that when talking to UC members outside of his congregation he sometimes has to 'go back being on guard and being careful, being wary about what you talk about'.

Diverse Congregational Expressions

Each congregation exhibited a fascinating and unique combination of institutional structure and religious practice, negotiated between the minister, the governing board and the congregants. This tension allowed both difference between and within each congregation. I compare the variance between each congregation according to the social parameters of age, gender, congregational and worship practices, and hierarchical positioning of the minister. Age is operationalised generationally, 'older' being baby-boomers, approximately 50-plus and 'younger' on the whole Gen X, aged 30–40, including a small number of Gen Y in their 20s. Gender is compared according to whether gender relations were easy or strained as determined by participant comments and observations, how gendered characteristics were understood and enacted or queered, and whether gender-inclusive language was used. In addition worship practices, including the service liturgies, the music and communion practices, are compared. While these comparisons are broad and generalised they give some understanding of the considerable complexity of the MCC, the backdrop of this study. The following section details these differences according to the external spaces, the people, and the congregational and worship practices.

Table 5.1: Characteristics of four MCC congregations

		MCC1 Morn	MCC1 Eve	MCC2	MCC3
Congregation					
	Age	Older (56*)	Younger (40*)	Younger (32*)	Older (60*)
	Dress	Mixed	Informal	Informal	Mixed
	Gender mix	M 70/F 30	M 60/F 40	M 60/F 40	M 60/ F 40
Gender					
	Relations	Strained	Easy	Easy	Easy
	Construction	Dichotomous Limited Fuzzying	Dichotomous Limited Fuzzying	Queer	Dichotomous Limited Fuzzying
	Use of gender- inclusive language	Strict	Strict	Relaxed	Strict
Worship					
	Communion	Formal	Informal	Informal	Formal
	Laying on of hands	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
	Music	Traditional	Charismatic	Charismatic	Traditional
Minister					
	Relations	Authority	Authority	Egalitarian	Egalitarian
	Dress	Formal	Informal	Informal	Formal

*Denotes average age of interviewees as a guide to age demographics.

Space

MCC1, the largest of the three congregations visited, was the only congregation in Australia to have purchased its own premises. The octagonal-shaped building, a former Church of Christ Scientist building, was bought in 1999/2000 and has the potential to seat upwards of 100 people. MCC2, formed in November 2008 and self-described as a small ‘independent Community in the denomination of UFMCC’ (Crave MCC Website 2014), on the other hand rents space weekly in an old sandstone Uniting Church in Paddington, from 1.00–6.00pm, holding a Sunday service at 3.00pm. The hall seats up to 40 people. This is similar to MCC3, which¹⁴ also rents a fairly small suburban brick church hall from the Uniting Church that seats approximately 40 people. MCC3 holds an evening service with the explicit purpose of allowing its members to visit other denominational services during the day. MCC1 and MCC3 have traditional arrangements of space, with the seating facing the altar, various musical instruments to one side and a pulpit on the other. In both the altar is covered with a white cloth, upon which are two white candles, a covered silver communion plate and two silver chalices containing grape juice. MCC2, uniquely, places the altar behind the seats, at the *back* of the hall. As in the other congregations this is covered by a white cloth, and placed upon it are two white candles, two glasses of red grape juice and a covered loaf of bread.

Decoration in all the three MCC buildings is simple. MCC1 and MCC3 both use the rainbow to symbolise inclusivity of sexuality and gender. This is intersected with the symbolism of Christianity, the cross by various means. MCC1 has rainbow-coloured crosses embroidered into long white full-length ceiling to floor white banners either side of the stage. Coloured lights are used to illuminate the altar and cross at different times in the services. MCC3 is

¹⁴ Since the time of the study the church has relocated due to the Uniting Church selling the premises.

brightly decorated, with long, ceiling-to-floor rainbow curtains in front of the altar upon which a simple white cross is secured. Similarly the pulpit is also decorated with a rainbow banner. The emphasis on rainbow symbolism in these two congregations is indicative of the age of the congregants. Of all the MCC congregations my impression was that MCC1 morning service and MCC3 are the oldest. I was informed in the interviews that many young LGBT people find rainbows 'old-school'. MCC2, for example, with its younger demographic, has little external decoration, certainly no rainbow banners. The only clue to their presence on Sunday is an unobtrusive sandwich board outside with the words *Crave MCC Dynamic, Inclusive, Progressive* in blue and white lettering. In both space and symbolism MCC2 distinguishes itself from MCC1, and MCC3, the more traditional of the MCCs.

Both MCC1 and MCC3 display clear signs of political action indicative of the social justice agenda of the UFMCC. Political action is institutionally and formally encompassed as part of the founding principle of the UFMCC (Perry and Swicegood 1990). The back wall of MCC1 is dominated by three ceiling-to-floor memorial tapestries, brightly coloured, embroidered with the names of those who died of AIDS. Underneath is a rainbow banner with the words *Born That Way*. On the side wall of the MCC3 hall are political statements indicating commitment to marriage equality. For example, one banner states, *MCC will not have fulfilled its purpose till marriage is available for all*. A few other banners stressed the inclusivity of the MCC to all.

People

The two MCC1 congregations (morning and evening services) were the largest of all MCC churches I visited. As this church has been served by a part-time pastor intermittently within

this congregation for over 20 years, there has been greater continuity than in the other two, MCC2 and MCC3. The pastor says that this continuity has contributed to a 'solid' and stable congregational base. Although the congregational base, according to the pastor, would number 'about 300 – a very revolving group of people (with a) strong core', each service is attended by approximately 30–50 men and women each week. MCC2 and MCC3 services are smaller, with approximately 15–30 congregants each week.

During the time of my visits, men outnumbered women consistently at all congregations, approximately two or three to one, which within the MCC is not an unusual phenomenon (Enroth and Jamieson 1974; Kirkman 2001; Morrow 2003; Primiano 1993; Wilcox 2003; Wilcox 2009; Yip 1999). This is in contrast to the general Australian population where women outnumber men three to two within Christian churches in Australia (ABC 2012). MCC1's traditional morning service is strongly male dominated, consisting mostly of older men with a few core older women members, while the 'charismatic' evening service attracts a fairly even mix of younger men and women within a broader age spectrum. Both MCC3 and MCC2 congregations are also male dominated, but the age of their congregations is strongly contrasting. The MCC3 congregation appears to be on average considerably older than MCC2. In all congregations there is a small minority of heterosexual congregants who are either relatives of other members or are impressed with the MCC message of inclusivity for all.

At the time of my visits congregants were on the whole Anglo-Australasian with some of southern European ethnicity. There was also a large minority of younger men of Asian background. The majority were middle-class and well-educated. While from this description I could be outlining a mainstream church congregation, this would be misleading. To the casual visitor the congregations of MCC3 and MCC1 contrast starkly with mainstream or

contemporary churches, with the 'gender-bending' of many of its members. Clothing and bodily expression are in many cases 'queer', that is individual congregants are 'doing gender' in ways that transgress the sex/gender norms of mainstream society. Some men, for example, wear flamboyant clothing that is reminiscent of Butler's (1990: 137) subversion of gender through drag. Similarly, some women wear fatigues and 'do' masculinity through gestures and bodily posture. To add to the gender fuzzying, in MCC1 there are a small number of trans-women. The tendency to queer gender is manifested more strongly amongst the older members. The younger MCC2 congregants (and the minister) seem relaxed and generally comfortable in unobtrusive dress, such as jeans and t-shirts, that is informal but in most cases, gender neutral.

The queer displays contrast strongly with the traditional format of the services and in some aspects, conventional space and, in the case of MCC1 morning service, the traditional dress of the pastor. My own response was one of excitement to see the freedom of gender expression, the acceptance of difference (within limits) which was juxtaposed upon the less than exciting message (for me) of 'believe and you will be saved'. In all four church congregations interviewees expressed a strong sense of 'belonging through difference'.

According to one member of MCC3, 'it's a wonderful mish-mash of people. It's such an eclectic group and everyone is kind of a misfit somewhere in their little worlds but everyone is incredibly open'. This beautifully sums up MCC congregations, in MCC1 described as a 'motley crew', in MCC2 as 'the dregs of society', who come, according to Michael (MCC3), 'not because their family deem it the right thing to do, as often with the Uniting Church ... here it's more they come in because of either their experience with God, the reaction of other Christians or a general longing for something'. Michael highlights not only the predicament of LGBT Christians who are often rejected by mainstream Christianity, and the sense of

belonging that worshipping together engenders, but the necessity to self-question their Christianity. This connected to the desire to live an authentic existence expressed by a large majority of the interviewees and is discussed more fully in Chapter 6.

Governance

The governance between each MCC varies considerably. Each congregation is a variation of the worldwide church model which stipulates that a size- and culturally-appropriate administration be set up (Bylaws of UFMCC 2013: para. 373). The board of governors of MCC1 consists of the pastor or moderator and four other elders, which in this particular MCC was until recently all male¹⁵. At the time of the study two women form the Church Life Council, the main focus of congregational and community engagement, which they explain is representative of the Holy Spirit, the feminine welcoming aspect of God as opposed to the board of governors, and which one of the women explains is more ‘masculine’, directive and harsh¹⁶. This was an interesting dichotomous understanding of gender in this congregation and is discussed further in Chapter 9.

MCC2 varies considerably from MCC1 in its institutional structure. Interviewees explain that MCC2 was started by a group of three women and three men, although at the time of the study they had a male minister (a recent visit to the website informed me that they now have an additional female minister). Leadership is shared among a central core group, which does not seem to have a rigid structure, nor is it dominated by men or women. At the times I visited women most often led the service and the music ministry, while the male pastor gave the sermon. However, sermons are reportedly often given by women. According to Emma,

¹⁵ The board of governors now consists of the male Moderator, three men and one woman.

¹⁶ The Church Life Council has now been expanded and includes two men and two women

an active member of MCC2, 'Females can preach, females can have just the same input. I don't even see a distinction where historically it's been very male driven in my experience of church'. In addition, while there are certainly central figures in this congregation, organisation, and leadership is not restricted to ordained clergy (there are no *elders* in MCC2 – rather team members). This seems to be in accord with the webpage claim (Crave MCC Website 2014), 'We want to move away from hierarchies of leadership, from corporate models and from bureaucracy, because Jesus didn't work that way and we don't believe the Spirit works that way. We believe in a spirituality of communion and shared leadership'.

MCC3 was at the time of the study emerging from a state of flux. Until recently there was no pastor, rather a vice-moderator and board of directors. Shortly before the study began, a female former Uniting Church pastor was appointed as interim pastoral leader, a part-time position. She was still in the process of fulfilling the requirements of the UFMCC to become fully qualified as pastor. Her appointment has filled a void and as I understood, is generally supported by the congregation, as explained by one male congregant:

She is fantastic. And when I heard I was really thrilled. I think she's a wonderful person and I think she's going to bring stuff to our church. But I also like the fact that she doesn't run it every week. She lets Peter have his say who is absolute opposite in a way. I like that we get different people doing their stuff up there and I hope she continues to let that happen because I think that variety is part of what makes it interesting. Yeah and I think that's one of the reasons I was really glad Liz is there because I think she is got a lovely, motherly nature but she can be feisty as well so there's that nice balance. ... That's great and it feels to me from what I've seen there's a pretty good support. If anyone's got problems with it, it's not obvious to me.

The board of directors consists of three men and three women. The organisation also has a worship team, responsible for organising worship and services, and rostering tasks during the

Sunday services to congregants, a practice in common with the other MCC congregations. Individuals from the congregation as well as board of directors and worship team are given responsibilities, for example to prepare the liturgy, to serve communion, to collect the offering etc. MCC3 also has a retired pastor who gives sermons regularly. MCC3 has a third team, a 'fun-raising team', who organised social events, at least once a month. Thus, organisationally they are committed to developing both friendships between church members and inviting others to get to know the 'church family'.

Congregational practices

All MCC congregations conduct Sunday communion services each week. MCC1 holds two: a morning service at 10.00am and an evening service at 6.30pm. These two services have been modelled to appeal to distinctly different religious and age demographics, the first being traditional and conservative; the second, contemporary, with a charismatic element. MCC2 holds a 3.00pm Sunday service and MCC3 an evening service at 7.00pm. While dress for all congregations is mixed, from casual to smart, the minister's attire is generally formal. The minister at MCC2, however, contrasts with both MCC1 and MCC3, in that he wears jeans and a t-shirt.

Participation

All MCC churches encourage congregants to participate in the services in some form, as an expression of the inclusive MCC policy. Congregants may, for example, not only serve through congregational and community activities, but also through doing readings such as the 'calling to service', by singing or playing instruments (music ministry), Bible readings, prayer, collecting offerings, or aiding the pastor with communion (as an acolyte). In this respect MCC is fairly traditional; however, MCC2 and MCC3 also invite lay members to

give sermons and to preside over communion, an expression of their egalitarian agenda. Several of the interviewees mentioned how empowering this was. For example, Emma, who had been unable to participate in any way in her previous church, exclaims, ‘And the preaching, I think the preaching is really great and it’s given me opportunities to serve that I wouldn’t get in other churches. And I love that!’ MCC3, in particular, impressed me in that the service is extremely community based; in fact when I was there approximately one-third of the congregants took part in the service in some capacity. Participation in the services was mentioned consistently by the study participants as essential to the development of their faith and well-being and is discussed further in Chapter 8.

Fellowship

All three MCC churches encourage fellowship as an integral part of their inclusive policy and congregational practice, providing safe, dynamic spaces to LGBT and heterosexual Christians alike. After each service refreshments are offered in either an adjacent community room in the case of MCC1 or for MCC2 and MCC3, in the service hall. Congregants in all churches are encouraged to bring savoury or sweet dishes, and to help serving coffee and tea on a rostered basis. Most attend this gathering and find it affirming. Fellowship is extended into time after the formal gathering. After the MCC1 morning service some congregants meet for lunch at a nearby cafe (usually once a month). Similarly the younger people attending the evening service socialise after the service. As one young congregant explains:

The youth usually go out to dinner afterwards which is an awesome time to keep talking about things that are a bit more personal to us – it’s really uplifting afterwards to go home and that’s just what I need to end my week or start my new week.

In MCC2, depending upon the group on the day, congregants meet informally nearby in a pub for a drink and snacks. MCC3 also meets at each other's houses or for meals regularly during the week, and many holidays are celebrated together. One woman, for example, always arrives with a male member of the congregation after sharing lunch together, 'the couple who aren't a couple'. It was clear from the interviews how valuable the friendships are, as one MCC2 congregant expresses, 'just speaking to people who had been through similar experiences and hearing amazing teaching ... and hearing, just exploring those ideas with people like that, that were well thought through'. One explains that until her not-very-religious partner attended MCC2, she had 'never realised how important it is to have gay friends till now. You need to have friends to support you; that just sort of know what you are and what you're going through'. The affirmation of being accepted 'just as you are' and forming bonds of friendship aids in transforming habitus. This is discussed further in later chapters in relation to its importance to the process of transformation, and integration of seemingly incompatible parts of the self.

Pastoral Care – Bible Study

Socialising or 'fellowship' was reported by most interviewees as extremely important to their life of faith. However, according to some of the interviewees both MCC1 and MCC3 lack pastoral care, prayer and study groups. While some congregations had mid-week prayer and study groups in the past, these have either been discontinued due to lack of interest or difficulty in organisation. One female congregant expresses disappointment at this, explaining that while it was a safe place to go, 'I was disappointed at first that there was no follow up care or anything. I would have personally have liked to ask questions about being gay and Christianity'. I could glean from talking with members that due to the small and widely scattered congregations, mid-week activities are impractical. Time is also a factor in

some congregations, as many members are employed full time and/or studying, and others are actively involved in other churches. In addition, none of the pastors are employed full-time. While interviewees impressed upon me the invaluable fellowship and community which developed informally, the congregations are not able to implement formal structures to address this.

Despite criticism aimed at its members based on interpretation of specific Bible passages, the MCC1 I visited did not dedicate formal time to Bible study. It is perhaps indicative that some individuals had already resolved theological issues before they become involved in the MCC, as concluded by Wilcox (2003) in her study of two MCC denominations. It could also be that rather than emphasising doctrine, MCC emphasises welcoming and providing a safe place, as well as enabling the religious experience of God as a healing strategy. This is in line with the understanding of the religious experience as fundamentally emotional and relational (Woodhouse 2013). The findings of this research indicate that of the 28 interviewees, 11 experience no internal conflict with their sexuality within the context of their religious worldview. This suggests that doctrinal conflicts do not necessarily lead to the internal disruption of self, and when they do these are resolved in conjunction with relational and emotional experiences, and religious iterative practice. This is discussed in more detail in chapters 7 and 8.

Outreach

With the exception of MCC2, outreach is limited, a fact that for some causes concern and disappointment. This is the case for some in the MCC1. One young congregant expresses the desire to improve this, saying:

That's one thing the MCC should do more of ... doing more outreach because that's a really important core element of churches, is getting out into the community and helping people out ... I think there should be something for people to find out about churches that are accepting and stuff. I don't think there's enough information out there. I would love to work with the MCC to reach out to people who were like me and thought there was nothing left out there ... I'd like to make it known that you can still be loved and build yourself back up after being hurt by not-so-loving churches.

MCC2 has organised outreach – 'The Favour – a ministry that works with the local residents in a low SES community housing estate' (Crave MCC Website 2014). Members of MCC2 meet every Wednesday in the community, provide afternoon tea and through talking to people in this community, gain an understanding of their needs. Some individuals from this community, predominantly heterosexual females, were attending MCC2 services at the time of my visits.

Worship Practices

The UFMCC, while being flexible in styles of worship and religious practices, is underpinned and united by foundational mainstream doctrinal creeds and practices. Beyond these, each denomination has the freedom of emphasis and practice. Consequently each MCC congregation I visited differs in their interpretation of worship and ritual. Each is described briefly according to the inclusive and transformative practices of liturgy and music, the spoken word and communion.

Liturgy and music

The MCC1 morning service, according to its website (MCC Sydney Services n.d.) is 'traditional, combining elements from Catholic, Protestant and other worship practices. We

recite liturgy, hear a sermon and sing hymns'. The service is tailored to the needs of the largely older congregants from a variety of traditional Christian backgrounds. While there is mention of the service having some Catholic elements, the pastor himself admits, 'Our morning service is a typical Methodist worship service', which is not surprising as the minister identifies as a 'Wesleyan Methodist'. Following the traditional approach, the minister dresses as in a mainstream Protestant church, in a white cassock or robe, a clergy collar with a purple coloured stole. The service is structured and intentionally predictable. The minister explains the importance of ritual and predictability as another central strategy for building an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere:

I think all of us need ritual, and we might call it something else, maybe continuity, in our lives. So, yes, coming to church is part of the ritual ... they know when they come here what is going to happen ... they are going to be greeted, they are going to sit down, we are going to sing a hymn, we are going to have a prayer, we are going to have a reading, we are going to have scripture, we are going to have the sacrament, we are going to have a hymn. So the ritual is maybe much more the familiarity, to be in a place where the familiar can happen around you.

The order of service is rarely altered, or if a new practice is introduced this is arranged experimentally in mutual agreement with the congregation, as explained by the pastor: 'We have an unwritten agreement, the congregation and me, that they will give me permission to try new things, but the deal is that if they are uncomfortable with that after six weeks, it will stop'. As he goes on to explain, 'So with ritual there has to be a dialogue. It's not my ritual and not yours. Let's find ritual that will work for all of us that will enlighten us, empower us, strengthen and comfort us'. The importance of ritual and predictability is validated by Anthea, an older member of the morning congregation, who explains:

I just feel so good. The traditional, even the hymns are pretty traditional; I know them from the Anglican Church. And the structure, it's always the same, you know there's not going to be any surprises; it's laid out in certain ways. Yes, I like that. I do like it and it goes by the gospel and the readings and I know are from what other churches do.

The importance of tradition is important to enable LGBT church-goers continuity in their religious life. Anthea continued to outline that it was important to her that the MCC services be similar to 'other churches', as she explains:

That lectionary thing, they are not like out there and running their own thing. They follow a set pattern that other churches do. I think that's been important to me too, they're not radical in any way. Like I say, if you went in blindfolded, you would just think you were in another church.

It is important for Anthea not to feel different, in any way devalued because of her sexuality. The traditional format offers her continuity, familiarity and inclusivity.

Similar to MCC1, the MCC3 service is also influenced by the Uniting Church background of the pastor. As in MCC1, the service is predictable and structured. Between songs for which the congregation stands, formulaic prayers are spoken by a congregational member with set responses intoned in unison by the congregation. Other prayers are prepared by congregational members and given at certain times in the service. Continuity is stressed.

The evening MCC1 service and MCC2 are tailored to meet the needs of a very different demographic. As explained on the website (MCC Sydney Services n.d.), 'This is our contemporary worship service. The music is modern, the worship style is flexible and different aspects of faith and spirituality are explored. The focus, as always, is on loving God'. The minister is dressed informally, in a black shirt and jeans, but with a clerical collar.

The service begins with songs, each seamlessly melding into the next. There is no set liturgy as in the morning service, where the congregation responds in a set way to words of prayer, but the sermon and sacrament of communion are both preceded and followed by contemporary songs of praise and worship in charismatic style, accompanied by a small number of instruments. As is often the case with charismatic music, each song is drawn out with long repeated choruses, with little variation of notes. The music is intended to be a form of worship and a sacrament in itself, drawing the participant into communion with the Holy Spirit (Veith 2013). Some, but by no mean all, hold their palms upwards, either with their arms raised or at their sides.

This is similar to the MCC2 style of worship. According to the MCC2 (Crave MCC Website 2014), 'Crave is unique among inclusive churches in Australia because of its charismatic and contemporary style, its progressive evangelical theology and its informal, dynamic worship services'. The services I attended were informal and flowing, similar to the MCC1 evening services. The approximately 20-minutes-long sermon was sandwiched between the singing of contemporary songs of praise, led by female singers backed up by guitar and bongo drums, the songs consisting of extended and repeated choruses.

Music is central to all MCC services as an inclusive worship practice. All the congregations I visited had small choirs with assorted musical instruments. At the MCC1 morning service in particular, music is traditional, mainly hymns, and according to the MCC1 itself, 'you may even recognise some of the music performed here from your childhood' (MCC Melbourne website n.d.). Many interview participants describe the value of the singing for them, the power of the memory of childhood practices. May, an occasional congregant explains, 'the singing, I really like the old songs – it evokes my past. My mother used to sing a lot and often she'd sing hymns. So sometimes I hear my mother singing the hymns'. In general

singing is an important element of praise and worship, whether traditional or charismatic. Vickie, a core member of the congregation, describes the meaning of singing for her as: ‘it is the most powerful thing in my life. I remember whenever I sing. I can just sing for God and that makes it okay’. This emotional response to music or ‘embodied memory’ is indicative of a shared religious habitus that drew individual congregants to worship together.

Spoken word

A second worship practice of the MCC churches is the sermon – the spoken word, a powerful performative tool. The MCC is committed to inclusivity and to preach God’s love for all people, regardless of age, race, sexuality or gender. This message flows through all sermons – regardless of congregation. There are, however, differences of emphasis. The sermon in MCC1, which is delivered to both morning and evening services, was in my experience generally worship based, with great emphasis on Jesus, and less upon God, expressing that ‘faith will set you free – just believe in Jesus and you will be saved’ (excerpts from my field diary). The sermons are often based upon the writings of Paul, which seems ironic as many of the writings of Paul are those used to condemn the LGBT community. This could be understood as subversive, a queering of Christianity, taking ownership of words that damaged and reworking them as affirmations. The pastor points out that while Paul didn’t necessarily ‘get it right’ regarding sexuality, women, slavery and relationships in general, he was clear on the importance of the relationship with Jesus. During my participation the sermons did not concentrate upon same-sex attraction or what some would understand as justification of this. The message was simple, ‘we are Christian and we are inclusive as Jesus would be’.

In MCC3 the sermon is given on alternate weeks by the interim pastor, the retired pastor or the vice-moderator. During my visits the sermon concentrated on practical strategies and

ways one could become like Jesus. There was a great emphasis on Jesus and that faith in him alone will save oneself. The retired pastor reportedly delivers powerful and challenging sermons and according to one congregant that I was able to interview, ‘we are sometimes challenged by some views ... but I do like the way it does create a discussion afterwards. It’s not a lecture, it’s often to stimulate discussion which I think is great’. This is reminiscent of Carroll’s (2007) existential Jesus – less the redeemer and more the ‘teacher’. Comstock’s (1993) gay theology also understands Jesus in a non-hierarchical light – as a brother or friend.

MCC2 also concentrates on the living of a good life and how one could become like Jesus. At the services I attended the sermons concentrated on how to become a true disciple, and what that means in everyday life, basing the message upon verses from Matthew. These sentiments, reflected through the sermons were echoed throughout the interviews, in the desire to be authentic and truly ‘Christlike’, and are discussed further in Chapter 6.

There is another side to MCC2 which differs from the other congregations and that is an emphasis on sin, which I saw as contradictory to the progressive nature of the services. The pastor explains that this is a reaction to the inclusive ecumenical nature of the UFMCC:

For so long we’ve been afraid of the word sin. I mean we never in Australia take out the word Jesus ... but we definitely take the word sin out, we wouldn’t even talk about it, and so we weren’t aware of our need for growth. And that’s why I think we got stuck in the place of healing, but never healed because we didn’t have a sense of repentance and needing to change. If I thought that I was already whole and complete I wouldn’t need God. I come to God because I want to be transformed and that is what we want at MCC2.

This explains the pastor’s claim, for example, that while MCC1 is about healing, ‘MCC2 is going beyond that to create something new’. This helps to explain the apparent contradiction

between on one hand the inclusive contemporary fluidity of the organisation and relationships, and on the other the exclusive nature of the message.

Gender inclusive language

The spoken word extends to the use of gender inclusive language as a means of breaking down inequality and divisions, a fundamental tenet of the UFMCC. It is in theory practised in MCC Sydney, in MCC Melbourne and to a limited extent in MCC2. Gender-inclusive language is used in all MCC hymns, which are sung with words such as ‘kindom’ replacing ‘kingdom’, or the use of ‘God’ or ‘God’s’ rather than the pronoun ‘He’, or ‘His’. The pastors of MCC Sydney and MCC Melbourne articulate strong support for the use of gender-inclusive language. MCC2, however, does not institutionally support its use.

In all MCCs, whether or not the use of gender-inclusive language is supported, response to its use is ambivalent. I was surprised to note that despite gender-inclusive language in hymns or prayers projected on the overheads, congregants sang or spoke using traditional masculine Christian wordings or pronouns. These institutional and individual responses to gender-inclusive language are discussed further in chapters 8 and 9.

Communion

The final and arguably most powerful of ritual practices is the Eucharist, or communion. In MCC communion is ‘open table’ – open to any person who wished to partake. In each of the MCC services I attended the open table was stressed. A large majority of interviewees mention the open table as being central to their religious experience at MCC, central to their being accepted ‘just as I am’. Eucharist is also unique in that congregants come forward for communion either as a couple, with family members or with a group of friends. This

relational element was highly stressed at all the MCC services I attended, and from the accounts of interviewees it had a powerful impression on them. The effect of the repetitive act of communion is a critical element, a queering of Christianity, leading to the acceptance of self and transformation of habitus, and is discussed further in Chapter 8.

In common with the majority of MCC congregations (with the exception of MCC2), is the laying on of hands after communion. Each individual, couple or group of individuals (including the occasional canine family member) if they wished, are prayed over by the minister or acolyte. Being prayed over is an emotional and deeply moving experience for many congregants, clearly noticeable through observation, and mentioned as transforming by many of the interview participants. After communion or the laying on of hands it is not unusual for couples to embrace and/or kiss, a practice that made a strong impression upon me, and from the reports I received, many newcomers.

Communion at the MCC1 morning service, and MCC3 in my experience, is the most conventional of the four congregations. In MCC1, the pastor, or upon his absence, a respected elder consecrates communion. This is not the case in MCC3 where either the pastor, retired pastor or vice moderator presides over the blessing of the sacrament. The communion prayer in MCC3 emphasises the sinful nature of human beings and focuses upon the need for confession and forgiveness, in my experience more strongly than either of the other services. In both congregations those who wish to receive communion are asked to come down each of the two aisles where the minister and acolytes received them. In common with MCC3, a wafer is placed on each congregant's tongue and they are given a drink of grape juice. Communion in the evening service of MCC1 only differs in that a loaf of bread replaces the wafers of the morning service.

In both MCC1 congregations and MCC3, congregants were prayed over mostly in groups, at times for many minutes and often expressing strong emotions. At the end of communion, each of those helping then served each other and prayed over each other. This gave the appearance of a quiet harmony and warmth between the central worship team.

A unique feature of MCC3 was that after communion each congregant took a candle to a table on the side and lit it for a loved one in need of prayer. This is reminiscent of the High Church of England or Catholic practice; however, its use in connection with communion is a unique and eclectic development which appears to be supported by the members of the congregation; as expressed by one congregant from a Protestant background, 'probably the most Catholic thing for me is something that I've actually really enjoyed at this church was the little candle table on the side ... I've actually embraced that little thing'.

MCC2 is unusual in that the communion table is placed at the back of the room. After the sermon, communion is held, during which the congregation all stand up and walk towards the back of the room, gathering in a horseshoe formation around the altar. The pastor explains that although his intention is to form a circle, the congregation has always placed him at the head, especially during the blessing prayer. The pastor presides over the communion, consecrating it, welcoming all to the table. As in MCC1, he stresses a totally open table, invoking the spirit of Jesus to be there and in gratitude breaking the bread, a large soft white loaf. Each congregant moves forward, breaking off bread and dipping it in the grape juice, eating it; some 'hanging around' in the circle while they do so, and some returning to their seats. During communion guitar music is played. Similar to MCC1, many approach the table in small groups or with their partner, taking communion together, holding hands or arm in arm. Distinctively, however, there is no laying-on of hands after communion.

Conclusion

This description of the Metropolitan Community churches visited – their spaces, people, governance and practices – serves to illustrate both the similarities that characterise the institution and the diversity of experience and shaping of spaces within it. No institution is homogenous, although structures are put into place to encourage homogeneity. In the case of the MCC the basic tenets of belief and practice are structured into each denomination through regulations, documentation and the MCC-ordained ministerial obligations. While practices vary, they are centred on inclusivity: open communion at each service, the use of inclusive language and welcome to all, irrespective of background (Shore-Goss 2013).

Inclusive ritual practices enable congregants to experience the love of God and Jesus and to transform their individual religious habitus to come to a point where they can recognise their same-sex attraction as legitimate. The spaces and the people make possible the exertion of individual agency within the constraining heteronormative broader society. The following chapters concentrate on the process that individuals went through to resolve the tension between their religious world views of their upbringing and their growing awareness of their same-sex attraction. Chapter 6 describes the desire articulated by a large number of the participants in this study to live meaningful life through being true to themselves. Their actions are driven by the moral imperatives based upon their ‘horizons of significance’ and include living as an authentic Christian and living an authentic life according to their ‘true sexuality’. The process of becoming authentic is described in chapters 7 and 8.

Chapter 6: Seeking the Authentic Self

I was searching for the truth – I wanted to be truthful to myself. I was coming to terms with my sexuality as being gay but I wasn't hundred per cent sure because I thought maybe I'm right, maybe I'm wrong. But I wanted to be truthful to myself and to God, to God. 'Seek first the Kingdom of God and all his righteousness. And all these things shall be added unto you'. I thought oh, I won't lose because I will be in the right...I had...a sudden connection with my sexuality by the age of 24. And I remember, after going out and having a lovely time, I went to my room. And I was down on the floor in tears crying as the whole world is just revolving. And within me, a voice started from the ground and just...the grace to be myself, to start to be myself... That helped me a lot just to come back again. It was really restructuring myself. And I'm following my inner voice through all this time (Nova).

Once I realised that that is who I am, I just ran with it...I knew that there was no alternative. I could not deal with this by burying it. And to be honest, I didn't want to. So again, everything I do is underpinned by my spirituality. It's underpinned by my relationship with God. I'm going, 'God, what is it that you want me to do? What's going to make you happy?'... And that underpins my motives for transitioning. It's what told me that it was the right thing for me to do. Not that I really had the choice not to do it, but it's what told me that was going to work for me. And going into something knowing it's going to work, you sort of, you go in knowing you just can't fail. And that's a huge bonus when you're tearing your life apart and rebuilding it (Sylvia).

Introduction

Nova's and Sylvia's stories express unequivocally their desire to live Christian moral and authentic lives. Nova says she is seeking 'the grace to be myself' and Sylvia to discover and live 'who I am'. Their desire is to seek, as Taylor (1991: 28) articulates, their 'original way

of being human...called upon to live in this way and not in imitation of anyone else's [life]'. Nova demonstrates tension and self-questioning as she seeks to 'be truthful to [herself] and God', saying, 'Maybe I'm right, maybe I'm wrong', a common initial questioning experienced by the majority of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Christians who participated in this study. Sylvia, too, questions what would make God happy and concludes that the right thing to do is to transition 'to be who I am'. Both Nova and Sylvia illustrate the dialogical nature of self-identity, as in the search for the 'true self' they seek answers from God. Finally they illustrate the need for fundamental moral and identity restructuring as they grapple with same-sex attraction and gender identity: Nova 'really restructuring myself' and Sylvia 'tearing her life apart and rebuilding it'. They challenge the religious habitus of their upbringing.

This chapter introduces the lived experience of the LGBT Christians who took part in this study. As exemplified by Nova and Sylvia, a key theme that arose consistently throughout the interviews was the desire to live an authentic life, across the dimensions of sexuality, relationships and faith. All the participants express the desire to be 'be true to themselves' (Taylor 1991: 26); true to their sexuality and true to their faith. All, however, were cognisant of tension in the desire to merge their sexual and religious selves. The moral values of the participants were based upon the heteronormative Christian habitus of their upbringing. For the majority the morality of their sexuality was therefore brought into question as they deviated from the normative cultural moral order, causing intrinsic (internal) conflict. Others experienced tension derived from extrinsic factors, such as relationships with family members, church leaders, peer groups and other social interactions.

In order to explore, describe and analyse the aspiration of the participants to be 'true to themselves' to express their authentic individuality, I employ a theoretical tool expounded by

Taylor (1991: 15) – the ‘ethic of authenticity’. Saving authenticity from accounts of narcissism (Hookway 2013), Taylor proposes that the subjective and individualistic project of the self is constrained within external standards beyond the control of the individual. He names these meaningful common moral precepts ‘horizons of significance’ (1991: 38), shared understandings of what constitutes a moral life. They are necessarily relational, dialogic and give meaning beyond the self.

The horizons of significance are subjective and dependent upon the individual’s habitus and contextual factors and therefore not immutable. They are sites of contested moral values open to transformation through relationships, emotions, cognitions and practices. Drawing upon Taylor (1991: 38), I suggest that those who experienced intrinsic conflict were themselves the site of contested ‘horizons of significance’ where the external standards of their upbringing were at odds with the expression of their ‘true’ sexuality. They had begun a prolonged negotiation of their religious habitus and religious worldview.

In this chapter I first demonstrate the participants’ desire to live authentically; to express their ‘true’ sexuality and gender and to do the right thing by God and Jesus. I also illustrate the negotiation of the horizons of significance and that the participants desire to ‘do the right thing’ by God and others. They live according to the fundamental principles of their faith, principles external to and greater than themselves, in line with Taylor’s concept of authenticity. The LGBT Christians feel morally led to express their sexuality, despite some experiencing conflict with their religious habitus.

The Problem of Sexuality

The contested moral values centre on sexuality. Arthur, a candidate for ministry in the Uniting Church, explains that in order to deal with the ‘problem of sexuality’ the idea of a body/spirit dichotomy has been promulgated in many Christian churches. He expands:

He [the Baptist minister] didn’t see himself as a sexual being. I thought, ‘You are a married man with children, what’s going on there?’. He was just so ultra conservative that it was the old body/spirit dichotomy stuff that made it okay, but the body was evil, the spirit wasn’t, so what the body did was evil anyway so it was fine. Well, for him [my] celibacy was the only right and proper thing but that was not possible for everyone... You don’t expect that from everyone, but if you are in any way different you’ve got to be [celibate].

According to this thinking, while those in heterosexual relationships are given the option of marrying (which is deemed the only expression of sexuality acceptable for extremely conservative Christians), LGBT Christians are denied this and expected to live a life of celibacy. Very few LGBT Christians embrace celibacy and instead question their sexual and religious identity, including relationships with God, and others. Many face deep shame.

The dominant conservative Christian understanding of sexuality as hidden, private and shameful is underlined by Emma, a young woman, as she recalls her experience in a fundamentalist group. The greatest of all sins was seen as sexual:

You had to confess your sexual sins in front of the ministers. And they would yell at you in this service, that was sometimes how they preached, or preaching with their eyes closed because they couldn’t look at us because we were so sinful. And so people had to stand up and confess their sins.

May also explains her Christian upbringing and the silence around sexuality:

And then as far as my sexuality, you know in fundamentalist religion there's no such thing as sexuality or it's hidden behind marital doors, kind of. So, no preparation for that really, just the assumptions that you know at a certain age I'd meet somebody and get married and have children.

Within conservative Christian theologies the expression of acceptable sexualities is extremely restricted. The boundaries are also strongly enforced. The Christian moral dilemma centres on sexuality and how to live a 'good sexual life' is deeply imbued in religious habitus.

Several of the LGBT participants distinguish between 'healthy' monogamous relationships as opposed to a promiscuous lifestyle. This is a distinction made consistently as individuals negotiate their sexuality within the bounds of their faith. For example, Anthea, single and living a celibate life, when asked how she feels regarding same-sex attraction within the context of her faith, says, 'I don't think I would feel any different if I was in a relationship. If I was promiscuous I might. But that would be more about, even if I was heterosexually promiscuous, you know what I mean?'

Anthea illustrates the contested morality centring on sexuality. For Anthea, however, the problem was not same-sex-attraction per se, but rather how a person expresses their sexuality. This overlaps with the Christian teachings where monogamous relationships are generally promoted, and are part of the deeply engrained Christian religious habitus which contributes to how individuals feel and act. On the one hand Anthea exemplifies a normative Christian view of sexuality (this was common among the majority of the participants and discussed further in Chapter 9). On the other, the traditional heteronormative horizon of significance is challenged by all participants. As previously indicated, most LGBT individuals with a

Christian upbringing enter a state of moral questioning, with the majority abandoning their faith. For the active Christians in the present study their faith is culturally entrenched and deeply important to them. Their life of faith becomes a place of discomfort and at times distress as they negotiate their sexuality and religiosity.

A Life of Faith – A Place of Discomfort

The participants' stories reveal that a life of faith for LGBT Christians is a place of discomfort as a result of the moral questioning. The individuals in the study often experience conflicting desires – to live according to an authentic sexuality and to remain true to their religious worldview. The questioning of their own faith leads to a reflexive and individualistic negotiation of their faith. The concept of originality, a necessary component of authenticity, implies struggle against social conformity, in this case the implied or enforced rules governed by a heteronormative institution (Taylor 1991: 63). Originality sourced through self-reflection is crucial to the moral ideal of being true to oneself – the ethic of authenticity (Taylor 1991). For example, Liz explains that for LGBT Christians there seems little possibility of remaining in a comfortable stage of faith:

Well, I think for all gay (LGBT) Christians you have to be absolutely committed to your Christian life because it is just so hard. It is so hard because you are rejected by the Christians in community; you are rejected by the gay community. Unless you are totally dedicated you won't last.

She articulates the irony that those who were most sceptical, distrusting and occasionally hostile to LGBT Christians are fellow Christians who espouse to 'loving thy neighbour'. In addition to this, many of the LGBT community shun Christians. They understand

Christianity to be a patriarchal and heteronormative institution. Gahan (2013: 51) also describes the life of faith for LGBT people as one of deep questioning:

A common misconception of LGBTIQ people is that we lose our spirituality as a result of being ostracised and marginalised by our societies' faiths. Instead it is within this space that we are forced to question our religion and the existential questions that others can take for granted...it is in this place we are forced to discover the one thing that can sustain us on our tumultuous journey – our spirituality.

According to Taylor (1991), self-questioning is critical to being 'true to oneself'. An authentic life is a questioned, reflexive life. Taylor (1991: 27) explains, 'the powerful moral ideal...accords crucial moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature, which is in danger of being lost, partly through pressures toward outward conformity'. The LGBT Christians in this study engage in the struggle against 'outward pressures to conformity', to be true to their sexual and religious identity. Through this they have the possibility to experience a deeply meaningful religious/spiritual life. The 'abject' (Butler 1990) non-normative position they struggle with can heighten their religious experience, a finding shared consistently in studies; as early as Gorman (1980) and in more recent studies such as Wilcox (2003) and Yip (2005). O'Brien (2007) describes this reflexive experience as a deeply meaningful purpose for existence, or a 'raison d'être', rather than a compromise or an apology.

Nicky, for example, who has struggled for over 40 years to accept her same-sex attraction, expresses that 'I now believe God saved my life for a reason and that reason was to help other people and to understand them'. Rebecca also, who at the time of the interview had a quiet calm about her same-sex attraction, explains, 'I think coming to terms with my sexuality has

made my faith stronger in a way, 'cause you realise how much he loves you, what a plan he must – like he throws these curved balls at you but it's always, obviously for a reason'. This indicates the acceptance and understanding of being part of a bigger design.

The participants consistently voice that their religious lives are not only shaped but enhanced by their sexuality, in particular by the difficulties they face through this. For example Andrew feels 'privileged in being gay and being Christian and being happy and having that creates a different journey'. Like Rebecca, he explains, 'I think adversity makes you a stronger person...to have a stronger spiritual life', adding, 'You don't take things for granted. You don't feel a sense of sort of coasting through life'.

Nicky, Rebecca and Andrew express that the difficulties they experience as LGBT Christians become meaningful and their religious identity more authentic through the struggle. The struggle facilitates a deeper appreciation for God, Jesus and his purpose for their lives. The so-called dichotomy between their sexuality and their faith collapses when their faith calls for living 'true to themselves', encompassing authentic sexuality. Being authentic to one's sexuality and religion can be conceptualised as queer – a place where multiple aspects of identity are fused, where borders dissolve (Epstein 1994: 192). Becoming an authentic LGBT Christian was aspired to and achieved by most of the LGBT individuals in this study, a place of negotiated tension and reflexive questioning of moral values.

Contested Moral Imperatives

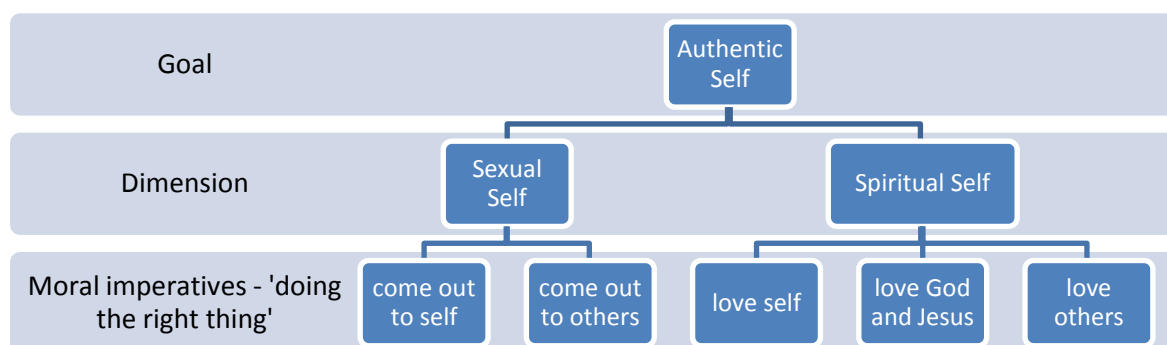


Figure 6.1: Model of the Authentic Self

The above diagram (Figure 6.1) illustrates how I conceptualise the authentic self. I have distinguished between the sexual and spiritual self, and the corresponding moral imperatives; however, these are interrelated and overlapping. Necessarily the spiritual self informs the desire of participants to accept their same-sex attraction. The authentic self is a fusion of the two, as conceptualised by Abes and Kasch (2007: 628) as ‘intrasections’. For the purposes of this analysis, I have broken down the following accounts of the LGBT Christians into two parts: the moral imperatives attached to being authentic to sexuality and the moral imperatives attached to being an authentic Christian. Both are understood as the right thing to do in front of God and following Jesus’s example.

Coming Out as a Moral Imperative

‘Coming out’ is the popular term used to refer to a stage of identity development that many LGBT individuals experience as they recognise their sexuality then integrate this into their self-image. They then relay that to others (Cass 1979; Shallenberger 1998). Coming out is a difficult process that is intensified by religious belonging. Scholars analysing the process of

‘coming out’ for religious subjects suggest that coming out is an act of love – a morally right choice and responsibility to others far beyond the private sphere (Eichberg 1991). Glaser (1998) describes coming out as a sacrament, emphasising the act of coming out as a sacrificial act. The individual offers their vulnerable self on the altar in order to experience God’s grace; the unconditional love of God (Glaser 1998). The implications are of loss in order to gain the grace of God. The authentic religious self and in the case of the LGBT Christians in this study, the authentic sexual self, is one that takes the risk of losing the love of others in order to gain a greater love: the love of God, of Jesus and of the self. Both Eichberg’s act of love and Glaser’s sacrament are appropriate to understanding coming out as a moral imperative. Coming out is also a performative act that contributes to the transformation of habitus. Coming out is a process – coming out firstly to the self, and then to others. It is a site of confrontation – confrontation of moral values and confrontation between loved ones and significant others. The findings of this study corroborate a large number of studies (Shallenberger 1998; Wilcox 2002 and Drumm 2005 amongst others) that demonstrate ‘coming out’ as critical to a resolution of conflict between sexual and religious identities.

Coming out to self

Coming out to the self is the first step to living according to a God-given sexuality. This is understood within a religious framework. Kath, for example, explains, ‘You are taught to love your neighbour as yourself, so if you don’t love yourself for who you are, you can’t love your neighbour, you can’t really love anybody else. So you really have to come to terms with who you are to love yourself completely’. To love the self becomes a moral imperative and enables many of the participants to seek and live according to their authentic sexuality.

After struggling to embrace her same-sex attraction Kath eventually reaches a stage of acceptance, saying, 'I feel at peace. Yeah. I'm still me, I haven't changed, I am who I am'. Participants frequently use the words 'I am who I am' to both express the essentialist sentiment that God made them as they are, and that their goal was to be comfortable and open about that. As Natalie expresses, 'it was a slow coming to terms type of thing. I'm not one to argue how I feel if I know how I feel. I know that I feel like I have God in my heart and if I know that I'm attracted to women, then that's who I am. And so it was just a matter of me coming to terms with being able to say that out loud'. Such sentiments resonate with Taylor's (1991: 29) self-discovery based upon 'moral feelings deep within us'. The authentic self, the 'true self', articulates this 'out loud' and defines the self in relation to others. She also indicates the meeting of sexual and religious identity and being at peace with that – loving the self.

The process of coming out to the self was for many a painful process where the body became a key site of struggle. It became clear to Nova, for example, that being in a heterosexual relationship was inauthentic. As she explains, initially as a [male] teenager she 'really wanted to be in the norm, to have a heterosexual relationship with a woman'. However, after a year of being in a relationship she realised that 'I am in the wrong position. I mean the wrong place, this is not right'. Her religious upbringing continues to haunt her: 'I still feel guilt, there's a sediment of guilt. In a bottle of wine you will find at the bottom the sediment. That's the nature of it – which has been brought about by religion and society as well. Facing my sexuality, [it] was best to kill, destroy myself...because I'm bad for society'. At this dark moment she finds solace in nature and her religious understanding:

The next day the day was still the same, like a lovely day. I thought with the positiveness of Christianity came 'love your neighbour as yourself'. I was

taught how to love your neighbour but I haven't really loved myself because I don't know who's me. And now that I'm beginning to know who's me, I'm freer.

Here Nova clearly articulates the ethical ideal of being 'true to herself' (Taylor 1991) and connects that to her faith. She states emphatically, 'Religion, coming back to religion saved me!' Rather than deny her faith, Nova finds refuge in her faith. She stresses both the importance of and the strengthening of her faith. The moral imperative of being true to herself that springs from her faith enables her to have the strength to live according to what she perceives to be her authentic sexual self, to know 'who's me'. She illustrates the eventual integration of living an authentic sexuality and living according to what she understands as God's higher purpose.

Like Nova, many (but not all) participants initially felt discord between their same-sex attraction and religious worldview and struggled with the seemingly irreconcilable contradiction. Anthony, when faced with a similar dilemma, articulates the importance of being honest about his sexuality in order to be authentic as a Christian. He had previously lived a fragmented life, at times outside Australia where he lived openly as a gay man, while passing for straight in everyday life. When asked whether he feels internal conflict between his same-sex attraction and his Christian beliefs he explains:

Well, I did because always the thing is God, is seeing everything I'm doing and probably the hardest thing as a gay man as a Christian...I wasn't living an authentic life, I was living a closeted life and for a single gay man that's not often a healthy thing.

As he says, 'God is seeing everything'. His desire was to be true to the authentic sexual self, in front of God and others. The relationship with God propelled him to resolve his

‘inauthentic lifestyle’. For religious individuals coming out as same-sex attracted is framed as part of a religious journey. This is a religious journey that encompasses all their relationships with others and the relationship with God. Coming out as same-sex attracted is an expression of authenticity, and a fusion of two negotiated dimensions of authenticity – the religious and the sexual. Rives (2005) also articulates that the resolution of internal conflict amongst lesbian Christians in her study leads to ‘an authentic state’.

The majority of participants express the desire to ‘do the right thing’ and are mindful of living according to what God wants. This desire is characterised by self-questioning and prayer. Natalie describes the conflict she felt when questioning her own sexuality: ‘I argued it in my head a lot...I always put on a confident front. But in my head I was kind of like, ‘Oh, I don’t know. Like I just didn’t know exactly what should be right and stuff’. Liz appealed to God in prayer:

So I spent a few months praying about it, and basically saying to God, well if this is wrong, you know, take these feelings away because I don’t want to do anything that is against doing what you would have me do. So I guess first and foremost always was my relationship with God, and not doing the wrong thing by him.

Liz entreats God to help her resolve her conflict, praying to find what God would have her do. Emma, also who formed her first same-sex relationship at the age of 25, explains how she felt during this time: ‘six years of struggling, just thinking, I don’t know if I should be really doing this, you know. Am I jeopardising my faith in order to have this, but I really love this person and for the first time I feel complete? And whole – but not free’.

Emma articulates that she feels complete and whole when in touch with her authentic sexual self. At this stage she is unable to integrate this dimension of her identity fully with her religious self. She struggles, as she puts it, to feel, 'free'. Many participants struggled initially with this dilemma, understanding their same-sex attraction as sinful, a violation of their upbringing. Andrew, for example, when confronted with the awareness of his same-sex attraction, expresses:

Well, either you hope and you pray and you pray hard enough that it will go away and live a good Christian life, get married to a woman, have kids and live happily ever after. Well, no, that's not happening. But the disappointment to God and my parents and family and friends and everything, how do I [reconcile it?] Or, I remember I had it all worked out, well, the one obvious one was to live a gay lifestyle, coming to terms with everything but that would mean turning away from God. And the third one would be the worst to my mind, living a double life and feeling incredibly inauthentic and incredibly guilty the whole time.

Remaining in his church as a Christian and simultaneously living as a closeted gay man seemed inauthentic. He could not initially find a way to live according to what seemed conflicting moral imperatives. On the one hand he was driven to express his true sexual self, on the other, he understood this as turning away from God, according to his religious upbringing, his religious habitus.

Angela, who also could not initially accept her same-sex attraction, dealt with the conflict strategically, choosing celibacy to manage her conflict. This response was made with the desire to do the right thing, not to violate her existing horizon of significance, based on her religious habitus. She made a commitment to God, saying, 'I needed to figure myself out or I

was going to hurt people, so I made a commitment to being celibate for a year'. At the same time she felt closer to God because of her struggle:

When I committed to the year of celibacy I felt so close to God in a way – it was my time of purity and coming back, so to speak. I felt I had done such a terrible thing in committing this sin – I didn't really rate many other sins like it – like I'm not very greedy for example, I don't really struggle with giving etc. ... but this sin was so intense and so shameful in both mine and the church's eyes that for me to let it go I felt a depth of his grace and I felt so close because of that. It's almost like because I felt I was 'the worst of sinners' I felt that God was the most amazingly gracious of all beings – I just couldn't get my head around how much I was forgiven and the reality of that.

Angela, through grappling with a moral dilemma which was causing her deep shame, paradoxically feels closer to her God and to Jesus. In order to find and express the authentic self, Angela denied herself sexual relationships in her desire to do the right thing, to live authentically, which at this time was according to the religious worldview of her upbringing. Her Christian habitus did not initially encompass her sexuality. It is illustrative of the moral questioning that participants engaged in, and the desire to be authentic to both their sexual self and religious self.

For the participants (n=6) who chose celibacy as a means of managing the tension between their conflicting aspects of identity, most realised it was a temporary stage and was not an ideal way of being. Patricia, for example, a woman who continually struggles to serve God and simultaneously be in a relationship, expresses that:

In the past when I've been in a relationship I've lost my focus on God. I have people around me who successfully seem to manage to do both. Yeah, but I find it hard. I've had a friend of mine saying that that's really the only way

us humans get to experience God is to love someone and be loved and I understand that.

She expresses the aspiration of many to live a religious life, where sexuality and the love of God are fused and cannot be separated. The individual is the site of the fusion of love of God, self and others. This is arguably a queer Christian life that the participants sought, one in which they could express their authentic sexuality as a reflection of God's unbounded love.

Coming out to others

For some participants their internal conflicts were not an issue, rather it was learning to live with the response of others toward their sexuality. Several articulated the importance of being honest with others regarding their sexuality and that without honesty they were not being authentic. Anthony, for example, explains that 'you can't be authentic if you're not being honest to the people around you. And I couldn't feel I could be honest so therefore I wasn't being authentic'. When asked what has the MCC has given him, he emphatically responds, 'Authenticity again. I know I'm now not hiding anything about myself. But at the same time, I'm probably living a much purer life and that's because I'm comfortable in my relationship with P [partner]'. The ramifications are that now he is able to live a healthier emotional relational life, which he interprets as 'purer'. For Anthony, like Andrew, being authentic is being honest with himself as well as with others.

Being honest was important in that individuals could profess to live according to higher principles, in a meaningful way, despite the often-difficult consequences. Angela, a musician, also describes the importance of honesty in regards to her sexuality, explaining:

Honesty has always been really important to me, it's been really important that as F [partner] and I committed to being together I was honest with those that approached me, y'know, to do gigs or for church or whatever, I would always say that I was in a relationship with a woman, that we're Christian and committed and it didn't change my relationship with God, but that I'd understand if they didn't want me to play or lead. Nine times out of ten I was given a polite no thank you, though you could tell it troubled people to say it. I could have just accepted the gigs but I just wouldn't have felt honest, like I had any integrity before God.

Angela, through living by her principle of coming out to others regarding her sexuality lost many opportunities to perform and was also ostracised by others. She describes being authentic as being honest with others, and having integrity before God. This led to a breakdown of relationships with previous significant others. When her partner, for example, was not invited to her previous best friend's wedding, she turned down the invitation, explaining:

it's really tough, that was a really hard decision for me because I am a people pleaser and her wedding is really not about me, but it's also a stand I thought I had to take, for my sake, and for J [partner].

Her desire to be authentic was also for her own sake; to be true to herself 'despite being a people pleaser'. She was willing to lose friendships for the sake of living according to a more higher principle, a broader horizon that made her life more meaningful, of greater significance. Similarly Arthur was stymied in his desire to become a minister with the Uniting Church due to his non-normative sexuality:

The selection process within the Uniting Church didn't become stressful until I was not deemed ready...they didn't think that ordained ministry was a good

place for me. ... They just made the decision on the basis is if we proceed to ordain will we be unable to place him because within the Uniting Church unless you have an appointment you can't be ordained. There was no way I could hide [my same-sex attraction], but I didn't want to either. As the professor at theological hall [who] was responsible for pastoral care issues said, 'You've maintained your integrity throughout, no matter what', and that made me feel good.

In all these cases the desire to be authentic, to be true in their relationships with others, challenged normative expectations, causing personal discomfort and occasionally, loss. Both Arthur and Angela did not remain defeated by the rejection they were subject to, but articulate how they feel 'good' and find meaning by maintaining their integrity in front of others and God. The requirement of being authentic in their relationship with God is to be authentic with others, often leading to loss and discomfort. . Anthony, Arthur and Angela all exhibit the qualities of being 'uncompromising' and 'genuine'. These qualities Speakman (2009), in her study of lesbian Christians, ascribes to 'authenticity'.

Coming out as liberation

Coming out involved risk and loss, but it was also a journey of release. Ruth, a retired minister in the Uniting Church, describes how the experience of coming out publically was liberating and deeply entwined with the spiritual and religious life. For Ruth this is an authentic life, and a life worth living.

I must own my sexuality, for the sake of other people of homosexual orientation but also so I'd be honest about myself and not be hiding it in any sense... I went to the microphone and said that I believed that I needed to now advise the assembly that I was a lesbian. And here is me standing there with tears running down my face...I got a standing ovation when I finished...

Because my life was so uplifted the creativity just flowed. It's sort of coming from me – not my head as much as my being... But a lot of this was coming from me because of the lifting of my heart. It really was, I mean, I wrote this poem, called '*the unutterable experience of the grace of God*'. I wrote it just after I came out. I felt as [if] I was flying. I just felt for the first time I felt whole and free and alive. I'm going to risk everything when I come out: my occupation, my reputation, everything that I value, I am going to put at stake here. I'm going to risk because I don't know how people will respond. And it felt like stepping off a cliff. And it was. I was – I was just lifted up, as though I was flying into the universe and I remember feeling alive and whole and free for the first time in my whole life. And that was, I just thought if I lose everything, I don't mind, I am alive. I'll grieve it. Of course I would mind, I did mind, but it was nothing compared to my sense of fullness and alive – being alive. So I never regretted it for a minute, not a minute.

Ruth's experience of, 'feeling alive, and whole and free' is an indication of the performative power of 'coming out', of 'stepping off a cliff', as she articulates it. The freedom and creativity she experiences as a result is a powerful and emotional catalytic moment, a moment that turns the direction of her life. Ruth was willing to risk all in order to be authentic to what she understood as her 'true self'. She also articulates the moral responsibility from a very public position, 'for the sake of other people of homosexual orientation'.

Coming out is the site of intense tension between the desire to express a God-given authentic sexuality and the desire to live an authentic life according to the Christian principles. As illustrated above, these two supposedly conflicting aspects of self speak to each other and inform each other. Individuals are empowered through their faith to live according to their authentic sexuality. The following section concentrates on being a true Christian by loving

God, following or becoming like Jesus and loving your neighbour as yourself. The moral imperative is to be an authentic Christian.

Being an Authentic Christian

A second dimension of ‘doing the right thing’ and living an authentic life is to live according to basic Christian principles of ‘Loving the Lord as your God, and loving your neighbour as yourself’. The individualised faith of the LGBT Christians involves a tension between living according to their authentic sexuality and living as an authentic Christian. The participants negotiate this tension and aspire to both, in the most part successfully. The Christian tradition is a shared ‘horizon of significance’ and creates meaning for the participants’ lives. The ethic of authenticity is lived through the relationships with God, with Jesus and with neighbours.

Relationship with God

The participants recognise the relationship with God is pivotal in seeking and remaining true to the authentic self. By living a ‘good life’ they embody the authentic self. This relationship also works as an anchor when conflict occurred with other Christian institutions. God provides a meaningful moral benchmark that remains stable despite struggle and conflict. In their youth in particular, the LGBT Christians often felt confused and rejected, turning to God as their salvation and stalwart, a significant Other that did not change. As Vicky expresses, ‘God was always there...a comfort...that never changed’. The relationship with God was also one that was grappled with and questioned. Sylvia encapsulates the intense questioning of self, faith, and God:

I guess that conversion experience somewhere around 8 or 9, I began to take more seriously this relationship with God. But for me, it was something I took almost literally. Because of the challenges of listening to a spiritual being that you can't just sit down and have this sort of conversation with, it's very easy to hear what you want things to be and as a result, you are looking very closely at the theology that you're hearing from the pulpit. And checking that how I'm understanding the relationship, because a sense of presence is tangible to what that means in terms of the way I live, that's where I let the theology inform.

Sylvia, who was brought up in a conservative Protestant church, slowly 'chipped away at the heteronormative theology' through a complex process of reflective prayer and researching theology. For her, theology was powerful and influential. Her relationship to God was informed by her grappling with theological issues. On the other hand God was very real to her, experiential and a powerful emotional support:

I didn't take this as an exercise in faith or theology. The word was relationship so I treated it as a relationship...it's a sense of awareness in your heart internally...for me it has been a very strong sense of presence... My relationship with God is something very tangible, as tangible as my relationship with B [partner].

Sylvia relates to God on a very personal level, and it is through this relationship that she slowly reassembles her understanding of same-sex attraction within her religious worldview. 'I focused on my relationship with God. God, I need help here. I'm really struggling. He was helping... I began questioning the theology, 20 years of conservative theology that said relationships are always opposite sex'.

God represents a higher moral standard, one that does not change. In a study of four rural lesbians in the USA, Hansen and Lambert (2010) concentrate on grief and loss within religion. Similar to many participants in this study, they report that despite this loss these individuals conceptualise God as loving and accepting, and find their own way of being Christian. The relationship with God, whether personal or more distant, is significant to the LGBT Christian participants. To love God and to love as God does is the aspiration, the horizon of significance, which sustains the individuals in their search for authenticity. A second theme that emerged was the desire to following the path of Jesus and/or becoming like Jesus.

Relationship with Jesus

The desire to get back to what participants believe to be basic principles of religion and Christianity, to follow the footsteps of Jesus and to become a 'true' Christian, is expressed by many despite, and in many cases in response to, being rejected from mainstream churches. There are two distinct patterns in the way individuals understand loving Jesus: following in Jesus's footsteps, with a hierarchical Jesus as a leader, and walking on the same level, with Jesus as a friend.

Arthur explains his commitment to following Jesus. From his childhood he was moved by the story of Pilgrim's Progress, and from that time determined to walk the 'right' path out of gratitude to Jesus:

The awareness that because of what Christ had done for me I needed to repay that in committing my life to that. And that story of the Pilgrim's Progress of the right thing and the following of the message, the following of the story of Christ and the leading of God. It all made sense at that point that that was the

only appropriate thing to do. I believe that that was where God had led me to that point and that was what was right for me and I haven't changed that in all of that time, yeah.

Rebecca, on the other hand, understands Jesus as a friend. She describes how her relationship to Jesus was basic and integral to her Christian life. She compares Jesus and Paul in a short but revealing statement:

It's like Jesus was the hippy that told everybody to love everybody, then Paul came along and he was the harder act, kind of thing... I just love the way he taught, like, what a friend I have in Jesus... Keep Jesus Christ in your heart and you will see his face in everybody you meet.

Rebecca explains further, 'Jesus says there is no law except to love the lord as your God, and to love your neighbour as yourself. And really, I mean, the rest of it is just rules that Paul made to guide the people that he was trying to help'. She is interestingly referring to Jesus as a friend, a move away from the patriarchal growth of the religious institution of the Christianity. This Jesus is the *existential Jesus* (Carroll 2007), an 'anti-institutional Jesus who raged against the temple cult, the huge religious industry linking religion and state in a profit-seeking, order-enforcing and grace-denying institution' (Bouma 2006). This distinction between the basic teaching of Jesus and that of the institution of the 'church' was voiced by many of the LGBT Christians involved in this study. The 'church', as many experienced it, represented the exclusive patriarchal and heteronormative institution, while Jesus represents inclusivity and love. Inclusivity and love of Jesus are the moral guidelines upon which some of the LGBT Christians seek to live their lives.

Rebecca, among others, also expresses that besides having a friend in Jesus, she could become like Jesus. This is again a move away from a hierarchical Jesus who one follows, to

a Jesus whom one can embody, or at least walk with. To be Christian for Rebecca was to be like Jesus: 'I am very rarely a perfect Christian but I think life is about – the term Christian means Christ-like and I want to try and be like that. She elaborates what this means to her:

You look at what Jesus did, he sat down and communed and ate with the dregs of society. As such, I'm not saying that we commune with the dregs of society, but it's, but they would be welcome if they were there! [Laughing] if you know – I don't consider myself to be any better than the dregs of society because I have done terrible things, you know like, myself, made mistakes and just because I happen to have a job, and I'm not a drug addict, you know, but I mean, life could have been different for me in any way, in any path. Why are we better than anybody else, we're not, because we grew up maybe more blessed, you know.

Anthony explains that whenever confronted with a decision he asks himself, 'What would Jesus say, [I] walk with Jesus too... I think God wants us to live like His Son did and that would make this world an amazing place'. He further expresses that to be Christian is not about being saved, which is:

Something has happened in the translation of the Bible I'm sure because I think a lot of people turn to the church because they think it's a ticket to another life. The one you've lost, I don't see that. To me that means you are doing your faith for selfish reasons and that doesn't make sense to me.

For him to be Christ like is to be honest with others, to love as Jesus loves and to live in healthy monogamous relationships.

Similarly Laura and her partner aspire to be more like Jesus:

So we went to this Buddhist meditation class and...Buddhists were teaching how to be a better person every week – any person of religion or non-religion could come to the Buddhist meditation class and learn to be peaceful. And we did that for years. But what that taught me was [they didn't intend this] but it taught me to be more like Jesus.

A clue to the importance of the lived experience of following the path of Jesus is given by Ruth, as she explains in a little more depth what that means for her and its effect upon her life. She distinguishes between Jesus (God who has lived on earth) and God (the Father), in that Jesus has been on earth, and can therefore understand the journey as she (and humans in general) has experienced it. She described an embodied being who empathised with the earthly struggles and temptations of humans:

I wanted to believe in a God that has literally walked my path, you know, that has trodden the ground with us human beings, a God who is not separated, you know, into some distant heaven, you know, sort of watching us from above, but someone who's walked our way, knows the temptations we have, the struggles we have, the pains we have and also demonstrates what life is about. As far as I'm concerned it's about walking towards life and if you do that – fullness of life, that's justice, integrity and truth.

For Ruth the fact that Jesus understood the struggle of living an earthly and bodily existence has enabled her to live a life of goodness and integrity. Her horizon of significance is the embodied Jesus, whose example she lives in accordance with. She understands that her goal of living a life of goodness to the full is enabled through this relationship.

Anthony, Arthur, Rebecca, Ruth, and Laura, in common with many of the participants, all aspire to live like Jesus, become like Jesus. This principle guided their life, gave hope and a vision to sustain them. In particular they stress the desire to be inclusive, to love others, to

find inner peace, and to live a life of integrity and honesty. The way Jesus lived is the benchmark for their existence, providing a horizon of significance for moral choices. The relationship with Jesus enables these individuals to live a good life of integrity, one that is articulated as 'authentic', and one where they can be true to themselves, fulfilling the parameters of an ethic of authenticity (Taylor 1991).

This horizon of significance in Jesus's example is empowering precisely when participants experience rejection. Angela, for example, upon being rejected by a friend on account of her same-sex attraction, explains:

I tried to explain and thought she might change her mind but she didn't – I emailed her and just explained how that made me feel, and that I didn't think that would be what Jesus would do – in terms of equal treatment and discrimination on that basis.

Rejection and loss such as these sustained by these individuals in the course of maintenance of integrity are often understood as an integral part of the Christian journey of faith (Ritter and O'Neill 1989; Yip 2005). As Andrew describes, he can relate to the journey of Jesus: 'well, there's a whole theology of the down-trodden so that's what Jesus really [preached]... He ate meals with prostitutes and tax collectors'. Jesus epitomises values he aspires to, treating people with equality and justice. This is the crucial point in the lives of many of the LGBT Christians in this study, who in their desire to live authentic lives, encountered rejection, often from mainstream Christians, that could be endured when relating this to the life of Jesus who was rejected and misunderstood. Ruth also relates not just loss, but new life – a new reason to be – to Jesus:

As far as I'm concerned it's about walking towards life – fullness of life, that's justice, integrity and truth, if you do that you will be a threat to somebody and they'll try to stop you as they did Jesus. And yet this Jesus walks through that and life is restored. Not just restored but appears again because it's lived, you see.

The fullness of life, the new life offered by Jesus gives deep satisfaction to the individuals in this study. The reflexive religious experience of identifying with Jesus precisely because of being outside of the norm gives meaning, similar to the findings described by O'Brien (2007) as 'raison d'être'. The individuals' moral goal of living like Jesus, their horizon of significance, is the benchmark for living a meaningful and authentic life. This resonates with Carroll's existential Jesus, and is a decidedly non-institutional form of religious expression.

Relationship with self and others

Not all the participants articulate a desire to live like Jesus in terms of struggle or rejection. Many simply express the desire to 'do the right thing', most particularly seeking, as Rebecca expresses, 'to love the Lord as your God, and to love your neighbour as yourself'. Participants understand their lives as meaningful and authentic through 'loving your neighbour', according to this horizon of significance.

Anthea, for example, who has always felt she was 'able to do good' despite, as she expressed, 'being gay', experiences liberation in her new congregation through service. Through the simple act of baking cakes each week for the congregation, and doing the 'call to worship' each month she feels able to live a meaningful life. She also 'prays for friends at that church [MCC] everyday', and works on becoming a better person at work through prayer. As she explains:

If I focus and I pray on [issues], I have a much better day because I put my mindset that, okay, God help me today to shut my mouth and not get involved in something...I am starting to get unsettled here, I'm getting angry...I hand it over as they say, let God deal with it. I'll be surprised when it will work out okay, the unexpected and you're asking God to help you and it will be amazing what happens... God jobs, I call them.

For Anthea, doing the right thing is living with God in a relationship to the betterment of not only her own, but others' lives around her. Michael describes how being involved in church services and the community is far more important 'than just being a body on a seat'; 'I think it's the interaction and the ability to express something of how I see life and how I see Christian experience through what I do'. William reiterates throughout his interview that his life is only meaningful if he contributes beneficially to the lives of others:

We [he and his partner] are sort of disciples; I'm helping people with their problems – just the feeling of listening to them and talking to them is so great. I mean we had a customer in her 90s – and she was depressed...she used to ring up for her grocery order and we'd take it on Friday and bring up some fish and chips there and have tea there. Every week. We adopted her.

As he sums up, 'So that's life. You help other people'. Doing the right thing, loving your neighbour, based upon his horizon of significance, makes his life meaningful. Being 'a sort of disciple' is a moral guideline that allows him to live according to a higher purpose. The culture of authenticity articulated here through 'being an authentic Christian' is morally productive (Hookway 2013).

Individuals also engage in outreach as a way to 'love your neighbour'. This was practised in various ways, some within an institution, and others informally. For example, as the pastor of MCC1 explains, 'During the AIDS epidemic here, we were the first people to do anything.

We ran a pantry service for people with AIDS... You know, the pastor at the time put the first HIV victim in his coffin because no-one else would touch him'. Others involved themselves in 'intentional ministry work' at some point in their lives. Luke, for example, describes working at a Catholic-run homeless centre for double-diagnosed individuals with substance abuse and mental illness:

People with [multiple problems] get rejected from everywhere. It was just a surreal experience and we would help these people. And I was 22 and we were cooking meals for them...we had to dispense medication to them and they would refuse their medication. We were there for about 6 months.

Angela also worked at times in serving doing 'beach mission' with a Christian organisation:

There were a small group of 12 of us from all different churches and we'd go to the beach over Christmas and run a drop in centre for youth over New Year's, basically giving kids a place to hang out and feel loved, y'know, if they were drunk we'd feed them and give them a couch, if they wanted to chat about spiritual things we'd be there to chat.

While most participants have at some time involved themselves in outreach, there is debate as to whether this type of service is necessarily authentic. According to Andrew, for example, 'if you're not going out and starting a soup kitchen or going out to convert the world and be very evangelical, being a missionary in that sense, not everybody's born to do that, so [you] don't need to feel guilty in that sense'. To be authentic, for Andrew, is about finding what is right for each individual, the original self, and acting upon that. The key to being an authentic Christian is finding the 'inner truth' for the original self, in itself of moral significance, and then living according to moral guidelines that are sourced beyond the self, for Christians God and Jesus.

The horizons of significance which form the backdrop of the moral decisions that participants make are external to themselves. They are a product of the religious habitus and based upon relationships with significant others, and are contested. In order to make moral judgements that are in accordance of these horizons of significance, the participants often moved away from teaching of the church as an institution and reverted back to basic church teachings which entail doing the right thing according to God and Jesus; being honest and showing integrity in relationships, whether sexual, between friends and peers, within congregations and churches and within the wider community. This they see as an authentic way of being Christian. According to Taylor (1991), authenticity makes sense as a moral value when it is constituted by horizons of significance. It is not just an unfettered celebration of self and freedom.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that the LGBT Christians who participated in this study seek to live authentic lives through integrating their sexual and religious selves. All the participants are cognisant of tension between the religious worldview and habitus of their upbringing with their same-sex attraction or gender identity. A small majority experience this tension as internal moral conflict. Through deep reflection and the exercise of individual agency their religious worldview is questioned and re-worked. This is not an arbitrary or hedonistic reworking, but carefully considered, and painful process, often accompanied by a deep sense of loss. I argue that the participants act according to an ethic of authenticity as they seek an alternative way of being Christian, exercising their faith, remaining within Taylor's 'socially constructed and communally constrained' horizons of significance (Berger and Ezzy 2007: 121).

The LGBT participants are forced into a reflexive faith upon being alienated from the heteronormative institution. They respond by demonstrating an individualised faith that is reminiscent of Davie's (1994) 'believing without belonging' and supportive of Wilcox's (2002) argument that individualism is used to express agency when other options are denied. On the other hand the participants indicate strongly the necessity of a shared faith experience. The shared faith experience contributes fundamentally to the transformation of religious habitus.

The transformation of religious habitus and reworking of moral guidelines is a process that requires time and strategic effort. I propose that this is a fundamentally relational and emotional process. The following chapters follow the path of the participants in finer detail as they grapple with their faith and identity and work at integrating their religious worldviews and same-sex attraction. The first two chapters look at the process of becoming aware of the tension and at times conflict, the initial response to this, and the catalytic stage where relational and emotional factors enable a freedom to discover a new way of being. This is followed by a stage of transformation through bodily practices, leading to a state of fusion between sexual and religious identities.

The final findings chapter looks at the tension between the queering of religious practices and the resistance of Christian habitus, especially in terms of gender. I argue that in the desire to be authentic to their sexuality and to the Christian faith, the participants queer Christianity and spaces in order to accommodate the two seemingly disparate horizons of significance. This queering, however, is restricted and remains to a large degree within the bounds of the patriarchal institution of Christianity.

Chapter 7: Shaken Worlds

I'm still going through the process. I'm still struggling with (the concept of sin)...still wrestling with it. I am still going through the process...It's hard when you've had all of these set concepts of things built up over a long time, I was at my old church for 14 years, and then suddenly everything's shaken. It's taken a long time to trust again, and to learn how to trust God again, and I still struggle with that sometimes. I've gone back to the beginning, I'm trying to figure out sin, do I agree with it, what is it, what does the Bible say and how do I trust that...it's a long slow process (Angela).

Introduction

The previous chapter demonstrated that the LGBT Christians in this study seek to find ways to live authentic lives, both authentic to their sexuality and authentic to their religious worldview. In the quote above Angela describes how she 'wrestles with the concept of sin'. LGBT Christians negotiate ways to be Christian within the context of the growing awareness of the tension between their sexuality and their religious worldview. Angela's world has been shaken, and she is entering a self-conscious 'long slow process' to rebuild this. The next two chapters look in detail at the processes that the LGBT Christians in this study engage in when seeking to integrate their religious worldviews and same-sex attraction, and to reach a state where they feel authentic to their original selves.

In order to do this I rework a conceptual map of a process developed by Levy and Reeves (2011), which is based upon their recent qualitative study of the experience of lesbian, gay and queer Christians in the USA. Levy and Reeves propose and describe a five-stage process of internal conflict resolution, which at each stage is influenced by contextual and personal factors (Appendix 6). The stages are: awareness of conflict; initial response; catalyst;

working through the conflict; and resolution. In the following two chapters I critique and offer enhancements to this conceptual map to reflect the findings that have become apparent from the interviews with the 28 LGBT Christians in the present study. This chapter covers the first two stages, awareness of tension, and initial response. Chapter 8 discusses the latter stages, the catalyst, and working through the conflict. The final stage, integration, is the fusion of the sexual and religious self, the authentic self, as previously discussed in Chapter 6.

To begin, I question the assumption that conflict between sexual and religious identities always exists. In the present study, 11 of the 28 interviewees report no internal conflict despite being aware of tension between Christian normative beliefs and same-sex attraction. While the awareness of tension is universal to all participants, internal conflict is not necessarily engendered by this. This in itself is noteworthy, as most studies report conflict as if it were inevitable (Rodriguez 2009). Wilcox (2003) and Yip (1997b), however, note that Catholics in their studies had less difficulty in recognising dogma as outdated and irrelevant.

In my revision of Levy and Reeve's process I rename the first stage, 'awareness of tension'. Second, I question the use of the term 'religious beliefs' as the source of tension or conflict. I suggest that the source of tension or conflict is based upon the more holistic conceptual understanding, the 'religious worldview'. The religious worldview is built upon religious habitus, which includes but is not limited to cultural understandings, dispositions and emotional responses. This is not to discount the cognitive and theological understandings but to suggest that cognitive factors are linked to the emotional and relational. I suggest that emotional factors distinguish those who were conflicted from those who were not. I employ the theoretical tool of emotionality as understood by Ahmed (2004) to analyse the experience of the LGBT Christians in this study.

Finally, I add two categories to the second stage of conflicted individuals: one, a denial of same-sex attraction, which amongst participants in the present study was a temporary one, and second, a decrease in religious involvement, which was also, due to the nature of the sample, temporary¹⁷. Findings from this study indicate that denial of same-sex attraction was common to six participants and a decrease in religious involvement with or without relocation was an initial response shared by 14 individuals. This chapter focuses on these two initial stages of this process: the awareness of the tension, and initial response to this as illustrated in Figure 7.1 below.

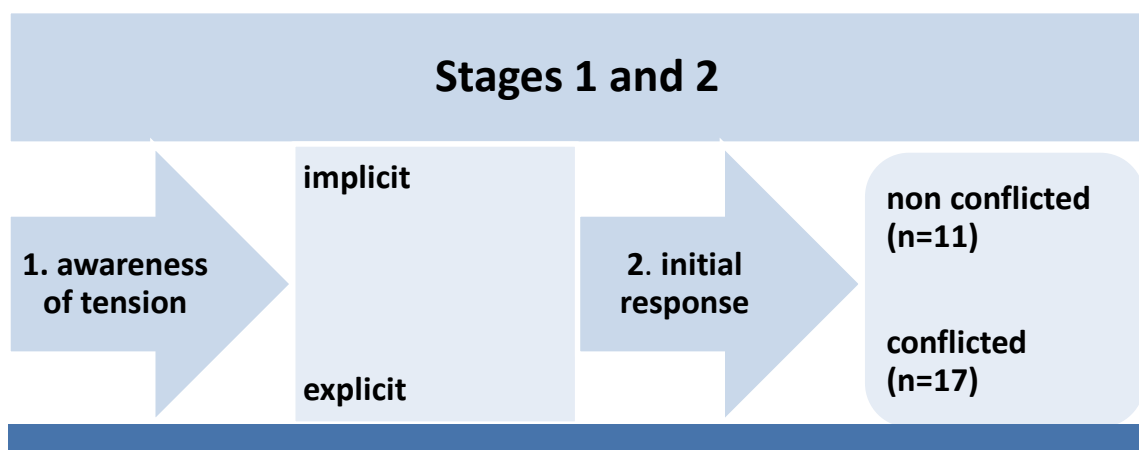


Figure 7.1: Process of resolution of tension – stages 1 and 2

¹⁷ While overall it has been shown that the majority of people who are brought up Christian leave on becoming aware of same-sex attraction (Couch et al. 2008), this study is concerned with those who remained active LGBT Christians.

Non-conflicted Individuals (n=11)

As far as God, I don't think God has a problem because no disasters have happened to me because I'm gay; I can still do good no matter what I am. So I don't really have that conflict (Anthea).

In common with 11 participants, Anthea feels no moral conflict between her same-sex attraction and her religious worldview. This does not rule out conflict with churches, families or significant others. I propose that those who are not internally conflicted are guided by horizons of significance based upon a religious worldview that successfully enables them to negotiate their same-sex attraction within this. Anthea, for example, feels she is an authentic Christian by 'doing good', and that her sexuality is not 'a problem for God'. Her moral imperatives – 'doing good', and 'embracing the love of God' – lead to a love of self. She experiences God's love, a love which translates into a love for her own originality, including her sexuality.

Only one participant was brought up with explicit acceptance of his sexuality and was so emotionally supported by his minister father that he cannot recall ever feeling conflicted due to his same-sex attraction. The others recall events or relationships with significant others that equipped them to deal with any tension they experienced. These relationships, which could be with family or God and Jesus, elicit feelings of love and acceptance. Laura, for example, explains:

Well, I think Sunday school gave me a very very good relationship with Jesus so I felt very happy, very friendly with having Jesus in my life. When I joined the fellowship it was more God; so as a teenager it was more God as a protector and omnipotent power but no fear and no judgement. I was really fortunate; I had no guilt, shame, fear associated with my religion.

Laura's horizons of significance were based upon a God of love, an experience of God and Jesus that was formed through her religious habitus. Fundamentally, those who felt little conflict *knew God as a loving God*. The emotions of guilt, shame and fear were not associated with their God or their religion. Their religious worldview encompassed these positive emotions, and resultant horizons of significance were based upon a God of love where loving the self – the whole self – becomes a moral mandate.

Awareness of tension – Explicit and implicit messages

Despite being non-conflicted, all of these individuals were explicitly or implicitly made aware of normative Christian attitudes to same-sex attraction. For example Rebecca, who was brought up in a conservative Protestant church, received the explicit teaching that homosexuality was wrong: 'I was homophobic in the [church], I disagreed with homosexuality, because that was what I was taught, that people that were gay were wrong'.

The majority received implicit messages that same-sex attraction was unacceptable. William, for example, an elderly male who reports no internal conflict, explains that he had never come out as same-sex attracted in any mainstream church (or to his family), remarking, 'I was very well known and if I'd made a move [to come out as gay] I'd be in trouble because I was involved in the Anglican church and the Methodists, the Baptists'. William knows his boundaries and in order to maintain his non-conflicted position remains within them. He is clearly aware of the tension between his sexuality and the church doctrine and chooses not to challenge it. He also explains that as he respected his father a lot, 'I didn't want to let them down. I kept it to myself...it was hush-hush...'. Although William expresses no internal conflict, he remains aware of the attitude his religious father may have had towards him.

Implicit awareness of the tension, as William feels, is most common amongst the non-conflicted LGBT Christians in this study. There are two major responses to the perceived tension: negotiation of church doctrine and disregard of doctrine. The negotiation of church doctrine, often described by the participants as ‘wrestling’, is a filtering of the information based upon relationships, upbringing and worldview. These non-conflicted individuals were free to wrestle with doctrine, in ways that enable acceptance of their sexuality. Many viewed church doctrine as flawed, or contextual and historical, and were able to reinterpret it. This ability is documented by Yip (2005: 49) who terms this ‘theological capital’. The second response of non-conflicted individuals is to disregard church doctrine (see Figure 7.2 below).

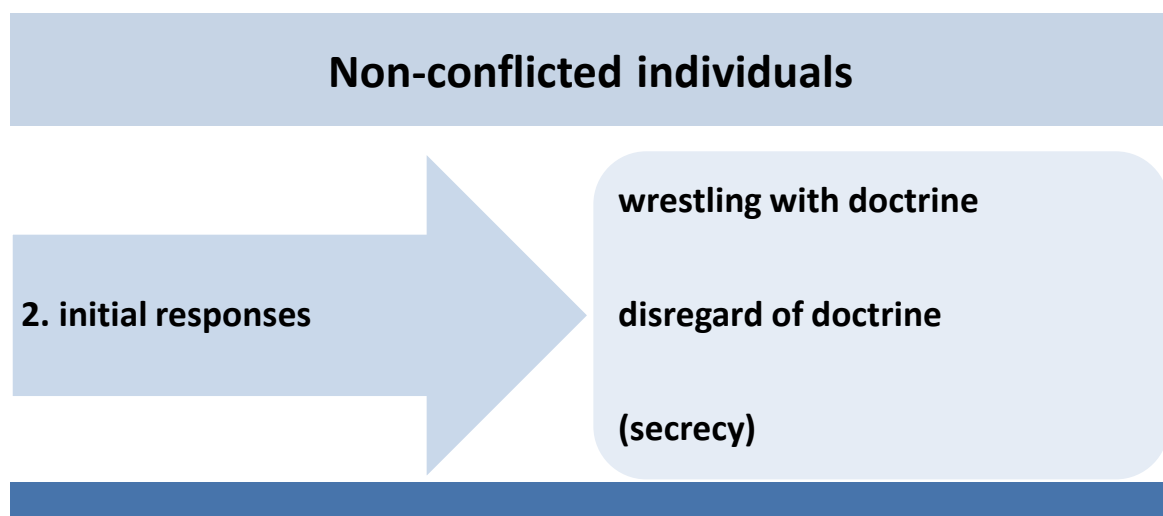


Figure 7.2: Initial responses – non-conflicted individuals

Initial responses – Wrestling with church doctrine

Despite reporting little or no conflict, for many participants theology is important. For these individuals their religious worldview, habitus and personal relationships equip them with

tools to ‘wrestle’ with this doctrine. Ruth, for example, now in her 80s, explains that at the age of 14, when asking her minister father about why hell should be so cruel:

And he said, so if there is a hell like that, what sort of God does it make your God? Would you like that God as your Father? Would you like to be a parent like this God, sending people to hell and burning? Well, think again because if that is what you believe transforms your God into someone who is cruel, and whom you couldn’t possibly respect or like, then think again.

Ruth’s religious worldview contains a God which above all loves and cares, rather than judges and condemns. Her religious habitus upon which her horizons of significance are based is influenced by the relationship with her devoutly religious father, who instilled in her an understanding of God as loving. She was also empowered to question ‘the Bible and ‘wrestle with it’ and find the great themes in there about who God is’. Her religious worldview is such that she can wrestle with theology, given that her fundamental horizon of significance remains unchanged. As she says: ‘There is an evolving of theology’. When faced with those who argue biblical ‘truths’ (that homosexuality is an abomination), she points out that the Bible also says slaves should obey their masters, and that Solomon had many wives. In addition to this view of scripture Ruth has knowledge of the historical presence of same-sex attracted individuals, and comments, ‘I just think we are part of the great diversity of God’. Despite this seemingly individual ‘wrestling’ with the Bible, it is based upon her habitus and religious worldview. Her relationship with her father is instrumental in allowing her to experience God as loving, which enables her to be open to the scripture and seek her own truth.

Another participant, Paul, experienced no conflict due to his religious worldview. From his earliest memories his religious environment was embracing of his sexuality. He consciously

connects his lack of conflicting feelings with his upbringing. Paul, now in his 60s, was raised in a family where both parents were strongly religious (his father was also a minister) and who loved and supported him and never condemned him for his sexuality. He explains, 'My Mum and Dad were very, very supportive and encouraging me to be who I was and there was never, from their point of view, there was never any disappointment'. They supported him in 'finding his true self', his authentic self. The emotional bind of disappointment or the threat of hell was not an aspect of his life. This enables him to understand and appraise theology without the fearful emotional attachments. As he expresses it:

Because I had a real connectedness with scripture I was guided by those who had done studies in this area, and say, yeah, I can agree with that. So I never had a conflict with scripture. As many people who don't have a real touch, a connectedness with Scripture they can't get out their minds, what they call Bible truths...it's not a Bible truth, it's a truth of man!

Paul articulates that his 'connectedness' with scripture allows him to remain open to what he understands as higher truth. Both Ruth and Paul were brought up within a liberal religious environment, where through their relationships with their fathers, both ministers, they had confidence to approach the scriptures free from negative emotional attachments to search for meaning in the scriptures and to concentrate on the loving nature of God.

Others, too, recognise church doctrine as contextually interpreted, unimportant in relation to the love of God and Jesus. As Victoria expresses, 'the theology is good and solid and sound and strong but people's interpretation of that is the bit that's flawed'. Interpretation is also the issue for Rebecca, as she explains:

You see I don't have an issue with being gay, in regards to the fact God loves me. I know that. And I know he loves me. And I believe he loves

everybody and I believe that – I have an unshakeable faith that he – that it is not wrong.

Rebecca did not need to read and study to find another interpretation of the Bible:

To be honest with you, I just knew... I'd grown up my whole life with a set of rules that the [church] laid down; you have to wear skirts to church – it doesn't say anywhere in the Bible you have to wear skirts...women can't talk, and we're [her denomination] one tiny per cent of the Christian community. Does that mean everybody else is wrong? So the whole Bible is really up to interpretation, isn't it?

As far as Rebecca is concerned, 'the most important thing...in the Bible is that Jesus says, there is no law except to love the lord as your God and to love your neighbour as yourself'. Rebecca provides a good example of a person who easily overrides conservative biblical understandings, saying that 'the whole Bible is really up to interpretation'. In common with other non-conflicted individuals, biblical passages condemning homosexuality held no emotional power for Rebecca.

These Bible verses focusing on the love of God and Jesus were a guiding mantra for many who reported no conflict. Similar to Ruth, Rebecca and Paul, others who were non-conflicted were able to sift through church doctrine and seek the core message of the Bible. As Lynne, a member of MCC3 in her 50s expresses, 'You know, God created us in His own image and you love your neighbour as yourself'. She continues, 'I can't be doing wrong here, he loves me whether I'm gay, lesbian, whether I've got, you know, half a leg or whether I've got four eyes – it doesn't really matter. He's still going to love me because he created me that way'. Her emphasis is on the essential understanding of her sexuality that reconfirms her identity as an authentic being, one created by God.

Peter, also a member of MCC3 in his 70s, takes a more aggressive stance: he recalls that when as a young man a pastor in his conservative protestant church said that ‘homosexuality is an abomination’, he thought, ‘He obviously doesn’t understand it. Obviously anything you don’t understand you fear’. Although aware of the tension, he explains, ‘I was able to rationalise... I probably was a strong person both emotionally and intellectually, I was strong enough to just able to look at this as nonsense’. For Peter the words ‘homosexuality is an abomination’ were not, as described by Ahmed (2004: 10), emotionally ‘sticky’. He could rationalise that fear was the basis for such a proclamation.

All of the non-conflicted individuals for whom doctrine was relatively important, yet easily rationalised, demonstrate the possession of Yip’s (2005: 49) concept of ‘theological capital’. They exhibit the ability to individualise their faith as documented by Kirkman (2001), Wilcox (2003) and Bates (2005) amongst others.

Initial responses – Disregarding church doctrine

Other non-conflicted individuals were not really interested in doctrine per se, and express that they know God’s love and that they would never be rejected. The loving God is also an unchanging element in a changing and unstable life. Victoria, for example, says:

God didn’t influence it, God didn’t make it better, God didn’t make it worse...but God was always in my life and always fully accepting, fully loving... God was real to me in the sense of – a comforting sense...nothing could break the link.

She continues, ‘The part I struggled in terms of sexuality was always about people. So God was never an issue but the people behind God had always been an issue...God was greater than my sexuality’. She thus felt emotional comfort throughout the process of coming to

terms with her sexuality. Her partner Laura also says, 'I had no problem with my sexuality at all. I felt that I was really glad I'd carried God, a little flame of God, in my heart'. God was always there, and formed an unchanging horizon of significance. She also adds that she 'knew they [her and her partner] hadn't abandoned God'.

Mary also had no interest in theology and took her own experience as her guide. After coming out of a violent marriage, anti-gay sentiment had no meaning. When asked if she had conflict regarding her sexual identity and religious beliefs, she answered simply, 'Not to myself, no! I only had to answer to myself'. This confidence in her inner voice, that she was okay with her God indicates the power of this relationship, the internal connection to her authentic self.

Others have always felt they were able to remain true to their God through doing the right thing, and that God didn't judge them for their sexuality. William explains, when talking of himself and his partner, 'We are sort of disciples; I'm helping people here at the moment with problems... So that's life. You help people. And that's what life's about, I'm sure'. Thus, Ruth, Rebecca, Paul, Lynne and Peter see how contextual Bible interpretation is, and find ways of encompassing their sexuality within their religious worldview, while Victoria, Laura, Mary and William concentrate on their own individualised and personal religious experience, a de-institutionalised experiential God and Jesus, that was real to them (Carroll 2007).

Conflicted Individuals (n=17)

My mum was Church of England, yeah, [we] went to a church where he [the minster] was real hell-fire and brimstone – they were really, really harsh. So gay and lesbian was just out! Gays are not normal! ... really strong views in my family (Annie).

Annie typifies the experience of those that were conflicted. She was thrown into moral conflict, a conflict she processed over years. She was convinced that her sexuality was wrong to the extent that she remained unable to form any intimate relationships with either sex until her mid-40s. The power of this conflict is starkly documented by Dubowski (2001) in his film, *Trembling before G-D*, and in studies such as those by Barton (2010) and Hansen and Lambert (2010).

Those who were conflicted were made aware of the seemingly irreconcilable difference between their religious worldview and their same-sex attraction, an awareness that caused emotional discomfort and moral dilemma. Annie was explicitly informed of this, while others ‘picked it up’ as implicit messages. Such feeling and thinking became part of the religious worldview and habitus.

Seventeen participants describe internal conflict upon becoming aware of their same-sex attraction. The most common conflict was the struggle between their sexuality being understood as morally wrong according to their religious worldview. One female, Angela, a member of MCCC in her 20s, expresses that as soon as she initially acted upon her same-sex attraction to a fellow Christian, she felt immediate conflict:

One night she kissed me, it felt really right and natural, but at the same time I had a Christian hymn going on in my head ‘Because the sinless saviour died, my sinful soul is counted free, for God, the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.

She continues on to say, ‘we both went and read the Bible and we both found we couldn’t do it, homosexuality was wrong’. Angela couldn’t initially resolve this conflict between her same-sex attraction and religious worldview. She and others frame this conflict in terms of

sin. Emma, for example, questioned for years whether she was doing the right thing, whether her faith was being jeopardised, whether she was guilty of this sin. When Liz and her partner met, both struggled: ‘we were both in this dilemma, well, is it right, or is it wrong, and if we’re not supposed to feel this way, why isn’t God taking the feelings away?’

For some this was an emotionally traumatic and a fearful awakening, as Matt describes:

There was an awful lot of conflict there. There was a conflict between who I am as a child of God, and who I am sexually attracted to, which I have tried – I am trying desperately to change but it’s not happening and I’d pray myself to sleep, I’d cry myself to sleep every single night.

The majority held a deeply embedded religious worldview which implicitly informed them that same-sex attraction was evil, sinful, immoral and/or unnatural. For conflicted individuals, this understanding of same-sex attraction engendered an intense emotional and/or cognitive conflict when confronted by their growing awareness of their same-sex attraction. Words from scripture and church, and responses from significant others toward same-sex attraction, provoke emotions. Through continual repetition the words become sticky with emotion (Ahmed 2004: 12).

The religious worldview was often constructed upon ‘Bible truths’¹⁸. Bible truths were understood as the seven ‘gotcha’ (as named by one participant) passages that are commonly used to condemn homosexuality. One such passage from the Old Testament uses the word ‘abomination’, a powerful, emotionally sticky word: ‘You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination’ (Leviticus 18: 22 RSV). As one participant explains, it was not until he could detach from the emotional hold of this word ‘abomination’ that he could

¹⁸ See Appendix 7 for a list of six major Bible passages used to condemn homosexuality.

begin to face his dilemma as a same-sex attracted Christian. Added to these were general heteronormative attitudes which describe the ‘natural heteronormative order’, based on Bible verses such as Genesis 1: 18–25¹⁹. Some participants were informed explicitly by significant others of the ‘sin’ of homosexuality. Others received implicit messages from society, church, peers and family. The words had a powerful hold upon conflicted individuals’ reinforced distinctions, separating the ‘Other’ from the normal. These sticky words were used to divide the legitimate from the illegitimate, imparting the message that same-sex attraction is evil and wrong.

Awareness of tension – Explicit messages

Of the 17 conflicted participants, nine reported that the pastor, other church members, friends or religious parents explicitly maintained that homosexuality was against church doctrine, or expressed hostility towards it. Luke, a pastor in his 30s, who was brought up in an evangelical, conservative denomination, describes:

We used to have prayer meetings against Mardi Gras, and we believed that the Sydney Mardi Gras was like Sodom and Gomorrah happening again. And that led to God’s judgement – the world was about to end...it’s now not just the fact that there are lots of people who are gay – they’re actually celebrating in public. We’ve now come to the point where our culture is beyond redemption.

He adds, ‘So when I came out obviously I had a pretty big shadow side to deal with’, indicating his clear awareness of this conflict.

¹⁹ Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him...and the rib which God had taken from man he made into the woman...therefore the man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh’.

Andrew, in his 20s, describes how the issue for him was not the seven ‘gotcha’ passages, the Bible truths, as much as the heteronormative assumption of Christianity (and the wider society). He explains that as he discussed his same-sex attraction with church counsellors, ‘it was a case of immediately, well, going back to theology and Genesis. Adam and Eve [male and female] and that’s the rightful way’. Andrew clarifies that the ‘Bible truths’ that condemned homosexuality as ‘immoral’ held little problem for him. Rather, the heteronormative ideal stressing that homosexuality was ‘unnatural’ held more power over him: ‘I think the hardest theological thing...is questioning the heteronormative approach in the Bible, about a man and a woman’.

A small number of the participants were informed of religious doctrine explicitly condemning homosexuality through the church, a message that was passed on through religious family members. The ensuing conflict was powerful. Nickie, a member of MCC3 in her 50s, was always and continues to be informed by her mother that ‘your sexuality is going to send you to hell because it’s evil’. This finding supports Barton’s (2010) study of gay and lesbian individuals in ‘Bible Belt’ of the USA in which she describes the permeation of religious based homophobia through all social institutions and general attitudes causing internalised homophobia. The individuals she interviewed expressed feelings of ‘self-loathing’ and fears of hell and damnation.

More commonly, messages from churches and families were subtle, although explicit and for individuals deeply emotionally disturbing. Matt, for example, describes a growing awareness of his position, not restricted to doctrinal rights and wrongs:

So, when you’ve been in church, been in a church family for so long, you do pick up on little bits a pieces and of course, because it was about me, and something I was struggling with, I was very highly attuned to any talks on

same sex attraction...and you do pick up on – in your church community, you pick up on mutual repulsion for same-sex attraction. You certainly pick up on any subtle things your pastor may say, or that your parents may say.

Matt describes how, for him, the church and his religious family portrayed homosexuality as ‘repulsive’. The word ‘repulsive’ was sticky and powerfully emotive, as is the shame generated from this. Matt also realised that he was a disappointment to his parents: the conflict was also between what my parent’s expectations were, what the church expectations were and not living up to that internally’.

This is described in a similar way by Anthony, when asked why he experienced such internal conflict at his own recognition of being gay: ‘It was more about an attitude thing – like my father’s reaction to people on telly. I don’t hear my father say spiteful things about anything but you could just see the distaste and disgust’. He further describes his feelings in response:

When anything to do with gay came on I heard these really negative things. My dad is a mild man really but the vehemence that came with those comments, I’d sit up and suddenly feel like a two year old and shrink.

He articulates his father’s ‘distaste and disgust’, and how he felt shame. Similar to Matt, Anthony responds to the attitude of his father with shame, an embodied emotion that initially made dealing with the conflict an impossibility. Luke, Andrew, Annie and Nickie understood same-sex attraction as associated with ‘hellfire and brimstone’, ‘hell’, ‘Sodom and Gomorrah’ and as ‘unnatural’ – extremely powerful words, also sticky with emotion. Feelings in response such as repulsion, distaste, disgust and shame are embodied in self-identity.

Awareness of tension - Implicit messages

Unspoken messages were no less powerful. Shame was also an emotion felt, for example, by Arthur, who remained within his mainstream church for many years while not being open about his sexuality. He made no mention of theological truths yet expressed simply that each time he walked into a church he would be saying to himself, 'But God, you know [that I am gay]'. He was responding to the implicit heteronormative Christian worldview that he was violating, a violation that evoked emotional discomfort and shame.

Churches and families also sent implicit but very clear messages of their attitudes to same-sex attraction. Liz, for example, who married into a conservative protestant denomination, responds, 'I'd grown up [in the church], you know, thinking that homosexuality was just wrong but which was never discussed'. Paul, a pastor who was brought up in the Methodist church, explains that homosexuality in the 50s and 60s 'was either not spoken of at all, or was accepted in as much as, Fred or George is one of those and looked after the flowers or played the organ...that was okay as long as you never pushed your boundaries further...and if you did, then very, very clearly it was made evidenced to you, it was just not welcome'. The implicit message was strongly reinforced through invisible boundaries. He further explains that he had experienced a change in attitudes in the 1970s in that the church had become more extreme after the gay liberation movement arose, saying:

It got worse – then you saw the churches actually become quite active in their opposition to homosexuals and actually condoning behaviour such as shock therapy...many of our older members have gone through that in an attempt to de-gay them.

Once these implicit and invisible boundaries were challenged the church responded by explicitly enforcing the boundaries.

The moral dilemma individuals faced was based upon a religious worldview and habitus that did not encompass their same-sex attraction. Their horizons of significance and shared common moral precepts excluded same-sex attraction as a choice. The tension was between emotional responses to same-sex attraction experienced due to religious habitus, and the growing recognition of the reality of their own same-sex attraction. For some this was encapsulated in words such as ‘abomination’, ‘disgust’, ‘distaste’ and ‘disappointment’, causing feelings of shame and repulsion. These individuals experienced internal conflict. Initially their horizons of significance were being violated by their own sexuality. Many could not love God, could not feel loved by God and could not love the self. They were also not able to be honest to themselves or others regarding their sexuality.

The conflicted participants experienced the second stage differently from those who were non-conflicted. There are four main initial responses to the perceived tension. These are: denial of same-sex attraction often accompanied by an increased religious involvement; secrecy; a decrease in religious involvement with or without relocation; and depression and self-harm (see Figure 7.3 below).

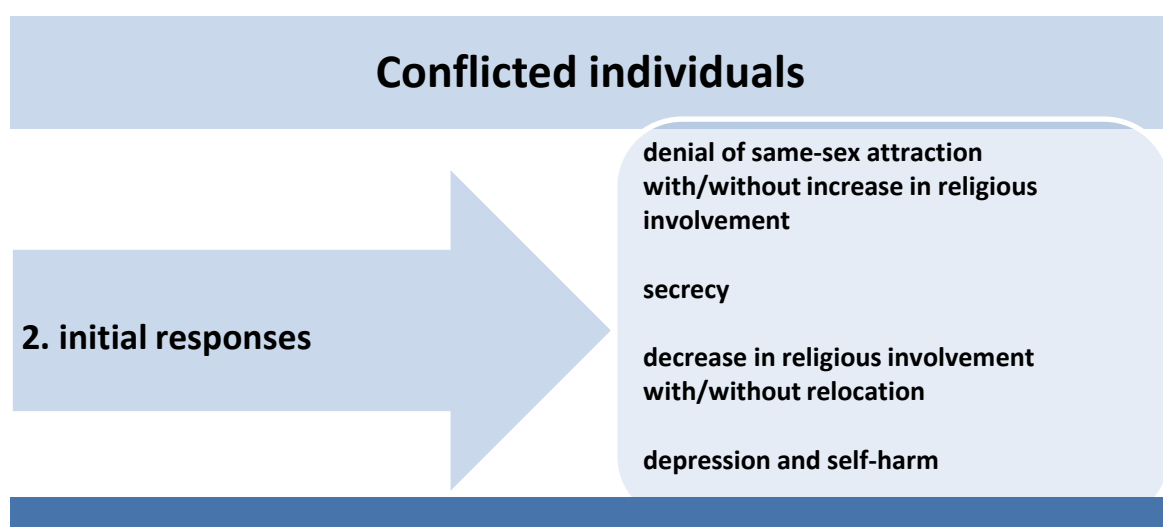


Figure 7.3: Initial responses – conflicted individuals

Initial response – Denial of same-sex attraction with/without increased involvement with religion

In the initial stages of the growing awareness of same-sex attraction, and seeking an integration of sexual identity and religious worldview, the religious worldview of the LGBT Christians' upbringing remained powerful. The denial of same-sex attraction was a way for the deeply religious individuals to avoid confrontation and to maintain living according to their initial horizons of significance. Significant others – in particular parents – were extremely important, and denying same-sex attraction was an attempt to 'be in the norm', as Nova expresses. The religious worldview of their upbringing retained its dominance over the LGBT Christians, as they sought to come to terms with their sexuality. This response is typical of the cohort, all of whom came from strongly religious families or for whom religion was deeply important. Often relationships with significant others such as church and family were all-encompassing.

Angela, for example, tried to deny her same-sex attraction by dating men, saying, 'I was committed to the church and being straight... I wanted to feel "normal" '. Similarly Natalie, in her early 20s, tried to deny her attraction to women, expressing, 'I always said to myself, oh, no you're not. You just think you are. And so I have boyfriends and stuff – but it never really means anything'. Sylvia, also for example, initially lived a normative life, marrying but soon realised she was not being true to herself, that this was inauthentic. She describes her wedding:

Can you imagine what it's like to be an actor at your own wedding? You're happy you're getting married. You're quite wanting to be there but you feel like you're playing a role. That's what I was doing. I was playing the heterosexual role. I wasn't being me.

Many reported at a very young age feeling ‘different’ and that they quickly learnt to ‘forget’ this. When Luke told his parents at the age of five that he was going to marry a man, he ‘had it drummed out pretty quickly’ and as he expresses, he soon ‘forgot’ about it. Victoria, who also realised very young she was same-sex attracted, explains:

So as I grew up I’m one of those gay women that from the moment I can remember have always sensed that I was gay...I guess it was a bit compartmentalised so that sexuality bit I put that into a box and tried to deal with it as best I could but it was really just in a box that I really pushed away.

While not forgetting, she set that aspect of herself to the side to deal with later. Emma, a member of MCC2 in her 30s was brought up in a fundamentalist Anglican church and remembers watching Sy Rogers²⁰ videos as a teenager. She says, ‘I completely internalised that [that homosexuality is against God’s wishes] and also just thought it was a no-go zone [her being attracted to women]’. She initially responded to her same-sex attraction by denying it, and, rather than dating men, remained celibate for many years.

Denial of same-sex attraction was often accompanied by an increase in involvement with church/religion. By becoming more involved with religion, individuals were trying to ‘be right with God’. Emma, while remaining celibate, was ‘just single-mindedly involved in Christian activity’. Angela, who recommitted to God after her first experience in a same-sex relationship, focused on her relationship to God, as well as church activity:

I felt so close to God in a way – it was a time of purity and coming back, so to speak...I didn’t rate many sins like it. This sin was so intense and so shameful in both mine and the church’s eyes that for me to let it go I felt the

²⁰ A Christian evangelist who preaches to young people to not have sex before marriage, and that homosexuality is against God’s wishes, and that you can be healed if you are gay.

depth of his grace and I felt so close because of that...I think that really motivated me to throw myself in to service and giving and being in Christian community.

Luke also recalls his increased his relationship with religion:

My religion became more intense. It was like that struggle that I was going through, the stronger the need to recognise who I was, the stronger I would fight against it.

Although he actually decreased his activity with the church he was brought up in, he became intensely involved with the moral dimension of theology, trying to reach, as he describes it, the state of 'moral perfection'. Emma, Angela and Luke were all brought up in intensely religious families, and could not and did not want to walk away from religion. Their intense moral searching and struggle to find 'purity' and 'perfection' indicated the power of their religious habitus and the connected heteronormative horizons of significance. At this point they felt they were violating these and in response worked harder to prove their worth to God.

Prayer was a form of religious devotion that often increased as an initial response to the internal conflict that individuals were thrown into. Judy and Annie, a couple from MCC1, spent many weekends away in order to pray to ask God to help them solve their dilemma, as related by Judy: 'You know, we are praying and waiting for something to come down'. Liz, a minister who became involved with a woman after a family tragedy, prayed constantly for the first three or four months, thinking that 'homosexuality was just wrong'.

Matt, who describes his conflict previously on page 206, tried intensively for over eight years since reaching puberty to deny that he was gay and initially attempted to resolve his dilemma through prayer. In his words: 'I'd pray myself to sleep, I'd cry myself to sleep every single

night. You know if you could pray the gay away, I would have been straight long ago'. In addition to trying to 'pray the gay away', he remained celibate for this period of time. Luke, Emma, Angela, Judy and Annie, Liz and Matt all intensified their relationship with religion, some through religious activity, and some through prayer.

For some, their same-sex attraction was undeniable. For these individuals a safe way to continue living with significant others and according to the religious worldview of their upbringing was to keep their same-sex attraction a secret. In fact, all participants, whether conflicted or not, used this strategy at some point as they grappled with the relational and/or moral consequences.

Initial response – Secrecy

Secrecy was an initial response often used as a positive management strategy by both non-conflicted and conflicted individuals. It was maintained selectively and for differing reasons. Some kept their same-sex attraction secret for years, and a few still remain not yet 'out' to family members and/or other individuals at churches or in workplaces. Secrecy often gave space to reflect upon the growing awareness of the same-sex attraction. Liz and her partner, for example, who didn't disclose a newly-formed relationship to their families, expresses that 'it took three or four months to work it through'. In this time they wanted space to question their feelings and how they stood 'with God'. Secrecy was also utilised to avoid possible ensuing conflict with family, church and friends, and to protect both themselves and significant others from emotional harm.

Most participants initially remained quiet about their same-sex attraction in their churches. Anthea, who felt the need to be in a church environment, says that 'I just kept going to the Anglican Church and hiding'. Similarly Michael, who recognised his same-sex attraction

while being married to a minister's daughter, attended the Baptist Church each Sunday morning and then secretly attended MCC each Sunday evening once he had 'quietly' located it. Arthur also articulates this management strategy clearly when he describes that when he kept attending church because of his mother: 'it was very much a big secret and it stayed a secret. It stayed a secret till I left there and went to Melbourne'.

For most the risk of being open was too great. As Emma, who belonged to an extremely fundamental church, explains, 'When I was in the [religious] group confessing sexuality [a ritual practiced in this church] – that was one thing I would never, ever have let out, even though it was something I knew was in me'. In this church there was the threat of excommunication should anyone 'confess' to same-sex attraction. Judy, who continued with church attendance, explains, 'I was like, I'm uncomfortable there... I'm going to get busted, they're going to come to me and say, what are you doing to Annie [her partner] to corrupt her?'

One participant, Peter, didn't bother to talk about his same-sex attraction, as he had little respect for the discriminatory attitude of the church he was brought up in. When asked by a minister why he attended his church very little, he responded, 'Because I find the church very discriminatory. You treat single people like second-class citizens'. His secrecy was based more upon his disregard for the principles of the church he had been brought up in.

When participants were open about their same-sex attraction the response of the church and family varied. Some churches remained adamantly and openly opposed to homosexuality. Most churches were tolerant but not accepting. Many participants were unable to take part in any activities or were treated as if they had an illness. Emma, for example, was unable to lead youth group, even for one session, when she was open about her same-sex attraction.

Natalie, in her 20s, remembers being called aside during her youth group with a Protestant church, 'and they're like, we need to pray for you. You can be cured of this'.

The greatest risk for most of the participants was the loss of family; hurting or causing disappointment for them; or the experience of withdrawal of love from them. William, for example, never disclosed his same-sex attraction to his family:

I was very proud of my parents. My father had a good position. He was head waiter at S... When the queen came he'd be there for her. And he used to go off at night-time or during the day in his red striped pants and tails and he used to have a motor bike. He used to tuck his tails up in his coat... And I respected them a lot and I didn't want to let them down.

He did not want to disappoint them and remained quiet about his sexuality till his father's death. Similarly Andrew, Rebecca and Annie are still not out to family. This is particularly painful for Rebecca, who expresses, 'I love them and I've got a very close family and that's the thing – they are so up in my life that – wouldn't it be so much easier to be straight, because why not live the easy life!'

Matt also gave an indication of the risk involved in coming out to parents when he says, 'I never told dad... Because my dad was my best friend I wasn't willing to risk that relationship on something that he may be prejudiced about'. Arthur, who also never revealed his same-sex attraction to his father expresses, 'I won't push issues like that. I don't think it's wise for me – I don't have the strength to deal with that sort of rejection'. Anthony spent most of his life compartmentalising and keeping his sexuality secret. He describes that 'I'd go overseas; I'd go on with a gay life and have a great old time. And a few of my close friends I've told but I've lived quite a closeted life'. At the age of 50, he eventually revealed his same-sex

attraction to his dad, who was deeply shocked and whose reaction was ‘worse than I was expecting’.

The majority of parents, though often shocked or disappointed, did not withdraw their love. For example, Laura describes her mother’s response when Laura told her of her sexuality: ‘[her mother said] “Well, I know!”’, and I said “Well, why didn’t you say?”’, and she said, “I’ve just been waiting for you to be ready to tell me”’. Although her parents ‘went through a long struggle of trying to work out what went wrong’, they remained caring and loving.

This risk of losing loved ones was evident and real for some participants. When Matt came out to his mother at the age of 20, she exclaimed that ‘this house is dedicated to the Lord, I will not have thee in my house’. Similarly, Natalie who was 16 at the time, moved out of home after her mum told her that she’d ‘been brought up better...she was really disappointed, and she didn’t want to see my face because it was too much for her’.

In general, secrecy was a useful and positive strategy that enabled participants to reflect on both their sexuality and their faith. Although coming out was seen as so important in living an authentic life, this was also used strategically. Individuals exercised agency in maintaining secrecy, and when and if the time was right for them, in their attempts at authenticity, chose to inform others of their same-sex attraction. Accepting the same-sex attracted self, and challenging the secrecy about it were also major steps in becoming authentic. For those whose attempts at secrecy were thwarted, the ensuing confrontation with significant others was extremely painful and at times destructive.

In the period of secrecy some individuals increased their involvement with religion. Some, however, when confronted with their same-sex attraction, decreased their involvement with

their church and/or religion. This was often in conjunction with relocation, moving away from previous religious and family attachments.

Initial response – Relocation and/or less involvement in church

Relocation and/or not attending church for periods of time were initially common, but temporary, responses to the predicament of the participants in dealing with the conflict. Movement from place to place was a strategy used not only in resolving internal conflict but interpersonal conflict as well. Some left the church after being rejected from the church of their upbringing. Liz and Lynne both felt unwelcome after their same-sex relationship was exposed by family members. They remained away from church for some time, even though Liz had been the minister of her previous church. Luke, though not rejecting church altogether, wandered from church to church, remaining anonymously in the background, after being ejected from his conservative family congregation. This liminal space enabled him to reflect upon his relationship with God and his religion. It was a transitional space where previous norms were temporarily set aside to allow transformation of social structures and identity (van Gennep 1909/1960). Often liminal space is associated with physical movement, emphasising the embodied nature of transformation (Beckstead 2010; Yang 2000).

Others left due to the painful internal conflict they experienced. Anthony felt ‘fearful of what he was inside and a shame to the world’ as he attended Bible study group, and ‘just let the church drift away’ from him. To deal with the division between his sexual identity and his religious worldview he became uninvolved with the church and would spend times away from Australia as an openly gay man. He was not able to remain both a church-goer and same-sex attracted. Nathan similarly articulated that he didn’t think he could be same-sex

attracted and remain in his church. His choice was to leave the church, in the desire to find his authentic self.

This is similar to Patricia, who remains internally conflicted. Her initial response to actively living in a same-sex relationship was to move away from the church, explaining, 'I didn't get into a relationship until I was 23 or 24 and at that point I stopped going to church for quite a number of years'. She continues to compartmentalise her life, recognising that 'there are two halves to life, personality and beliefs...at one time I focus on my relationships, and at the other times on God'. Victoria, although not strongly conflicted, also had compartmentalised her life while attending church, and in order to explore her sexuality she both geographically relocated and stopped attending church.

By geographically relocating or becoming less involved in religion, individuals were able to reflect upon their conflicting realities away from the influence of their families and churches. As 26 of the participants were brought up in strongly religious families, this meant a break from the continually reinforced religious habitus which in the majority of cases was in conflict with their newly developing same-sex attraction. At the same time they could build new relationships free from constriction of the past and explore new aspects of the self. It was a liminal space, a space between their past worldview and developing transformed worldview. For those who left the church, the majority stressed that, as Anthony says, they 'never left God, never denied God'. Lynne and her partner, who had left their church due to being rejected, simply 'knew they hadn't abandoned God' and despite struggling with the Bible and doctrine, felt no change with their God.

Their relationship with God remained their horizon of significance as they initially struggled to incorporate their sexuality in their religious worldview. Some, however, did feel

abandoned by God, which often led to anger and frustration, depression and/or self-harm. Their fundamental horizon of significance, the relationship with God, was disturbed.

Initial response – Depression/self-harm

Eight interviewees entered a state of depression for varying lengths of time. Anger at God, confusion at their predicament and frustration were elements leading to serious struggles that for some were so intense as to cause physical and emotional illness. Luke recalls:

I was very, very depressed and I think it was obvious to everyone that I was in trouble emotionally... Yeah [I was] angry [at God] because I didn't feel like God had told me the answers that I needed. And I didn't feel like there was any direction from scripture about what I was supposed to do. I mean the primary motivation for everything you do is meant to be love, and then these rules force you in a direction which in order to obey, you've got to somehow stop loving. And there's absolutely no help in reconciling that contradiction.

He had been brought up with the idea that anything contrary to his church's view of the Bible were 'words of the devil', and for years couldn't begin to deal with his conflict, the total contradiction between who he 'was' as a gay man, and 'what he believed'. In describing the extent of his conflict, he continues:

And then...I came to another point which was, I think I'm just going to hell. Yeah. Which was for me very physically real, like it was a literal religion that I'd grown up with. So that was – that meant fire. So, it was terrifying.

'Hell' and 'fire' were powerful emotive words that held Luke in his contradictory state. He also could not resolve his predicament rationally and experienced deep frustration. Nicky, also brought up in an extremely conservative church, has struggled with suicidal thoughts and

self-harm for most of her life, expressing, 'I started cutting myself up with razor blades because I hated myself so much. Oh, I hated myself so much for being gay because I thought God doesn't want me'. She has still not completely reconciled her same-sex attraction and her internalised heteronormative beliefs.

Those who struggled with depression and self-harm were in the minority. These individuals on the whole came from fundamental Christian backgrounds, in which their religious habitus had powerful consequences on their sense of self-worth. Their extreme conflict is indicative of the intensity experienced when individuals felt they were violating their own horizons of significance. The emotionality of the conflict – for Luke the fear of burning in hell and for Nicky the self-hatred and fear of losing God's love – is highlighted by the experience of these two individuals. At this stage neither can move forward to resolve this conflict.

Conclusion

For the LGBT Christians in this study, becoming authentic is a process. In order to integrate the two dimensions of the self – the religious and the sexual – individuals seek ways to encompass their sexuality with their religious worldview. This requires time and effort. I have outlined two stages of this five-stage process according to the experience of the LGBT Christians in this study. The first stage of the process, becoming aware of the tension, indicates that individuals respond in two distinct ways when confronted with emerging same-sex attraction and their deeply imbued religious worldview. Some become strongly internally conflicted while others are able to negotiate their sexuality and religious worldview.

Those who are less conflicted but well aware of the tension are equipped with the means to 'wrestle with theology' without the powerful and binding emotional attachments to the

‘sinful’ nature of same-sex attraction. They are guided by horizons of significance centred on the religious self – such as loving and being loved by God and others – that override any confrontation with their sexuality. Although they are aware of tension, the assumption that same-sex attraction is inimical with Christian principles has no power. Relationships with significant others are based upon acceptance and love.

The majority (n=17) are internally conflicted and enter a protracted process of struggle. For these individuals same-sex attraction is bound up with sticky negative connotations and emotions. Their sexuality is violating their horizons of significance and their connection with God and others is often disrupted. They feel their morality is compromised, questioning whether their sexuality is right or wrong.

The non-conflicted and conflicted individuals initially responded in different ways. The non-conflicted either ‘wrestled with scripture’ or disregarded scripture, concentrating instead on the relational aspect of their faith. Their emotional wellbeing was not affected. One strategy is shared amongst the conflicted individuals, that of secrecy. Secrecy is a strategy used to gain time for reflection upon faith and sexuality. In many cases it is a positive management strategy to enable a safe space for self-questioning and reflection before moving forward. For conflicted individuals the initial response stage was protracted, characterised in addition to secrecy, by denial of sexuality, an increase or decrease in religious activity, and for some depression, disillusionment and self-harm. This was a time of intense struggle where individuals were unable to move forward in integrating the sexual and religious dimensions of identity.

The next stage, the third stage in the process of achieving integration of their sexual and religious identities, is characterised by sudden illumination and empowerment: *the catalyst*.

This is a memorable event or a series of events that individuals experience, which they interpret as a catalyst to their transformation. These events are discussed in the next chapter, where I discuss stage 3, resolving conflict between religious beliefs and sexual identity – the catalyst. Stage 4, working through the conflict, is discussed in the second half of the chapter. Once individuals are empowered to move forward, they engage in various strategies to integrate their sexuality and religious worldview and achieve a state of authenticity, where they are true to their sexuality and true to their religious convictions.

Chapter 8: Rebuilding Worlds

When I met B [partner] I already had that information [of an alternative theology] so the next time... I did the search at that point. So it was probably B – B was the big catalyst for me in big ways to take this step, to come back to the church. And we went to MCC together (Anthony).

It was a process...so the steps in the process were – Scripture is not clear about this – meeting other people and going and seeing perfectly normal other people, and then being comfortable enough to actually go to a meeting and decide this is where, this is where I can actually meet other people struggling with the same thing I was (Matt).

Introduction

The LGBT Christians in this study seek to find ways to reconcile their sexuality with their religious identity, to be authentic to their sexuality and to their faith. For all, becoming authentic was a process, a process of integrating their religious worldviews with their same-sex attraction. The previous chapter details the first two stages of this process, the *awareness* of and *initial response* to tensions between same-sex attraction and religious worldview. A key finding is that more than one-third of the LGBT participants experience little or no conflict, despite being aware of the tension. Those whose religious worldview is built upon supportive relationships could easily negotiate doctrinal issues or disregard these altogether. Cognitive doctrinal issues had little emotional hold over them. These individuals emphasise a de-institutionalised form of religious attachment based on God and Jesus's love.

For those who experience internal conflict, on the other hand, powerful 'sticky' negative emotions were bound to their same-sex attraction. Relationships with significant others and

their own internal sense of self suffered. Their sexuality violated their horizons of significance, and many felt their morality was compromised, questioning whether their sexuality was right or wrong.

This chapter examines the rebuilding of previously shaken worlds of faith through two stages: the ‘catalyst’, and ‘working through the conflict’ (Figure 8.1: 226). The catalyst is the first stage of rebuilding a new foundation of faith. In this study catalysts are ‘moments of comprehension stimulated by new knowledge that propel the participants forward’ (Levy and Reeves 2011: 58) and enable individuals to begin to re-interpret their sexual and religious identities, to break out of the initial responses to the tension. Levy and Reeves emphasise new knowledge as being critical to this stage. Anthony, quoted above, articulates that the catalyst for him to begin integrating his same-sex attraction and his religious conviction was his partner. It was through this relationship that he came back to the church and began practising as a Christian once more. This gives added nuance to the understanding of catalysts.

I propose that catalysts for the LGBT Christians in this study occur through recognition that the religious worldview is questionable and/or the recognition and acknowledgement of their same-sex attraction. This recognition occurs through the breakdown of old and the building of new relationships and enables individuals to receive either new knowledge or to reframe old knowledge, which takes on new meaning, opening alternative ways of being. The catalyst is thus a complex mix of knowledge, emotional and relational factors. Ritter and O’Neill (1996) frame this moment as the moment of acknowledging loss, the loss of past expectations and dreams according to an old heteronormative framework. They understand this as a necessary moment before the process of rebuilding a new framework.

The fourth stage, ‘working through the conflict’, is characterised by individual reflection, information seeking and discussion. As Matt, quoted above, articulates, part of the process is meeting people, people who could identify with his own experience, with whom he could share. I propose that the focus for working through the conflict is significant relationships in safe places, and shared religious practices (Figure 8.1 below). Relationships and practices have a fundamental effect on identity, and have the power to change deeply engrained habitus and religious worldviews (Wilcox, in Shore-Goss 2013).

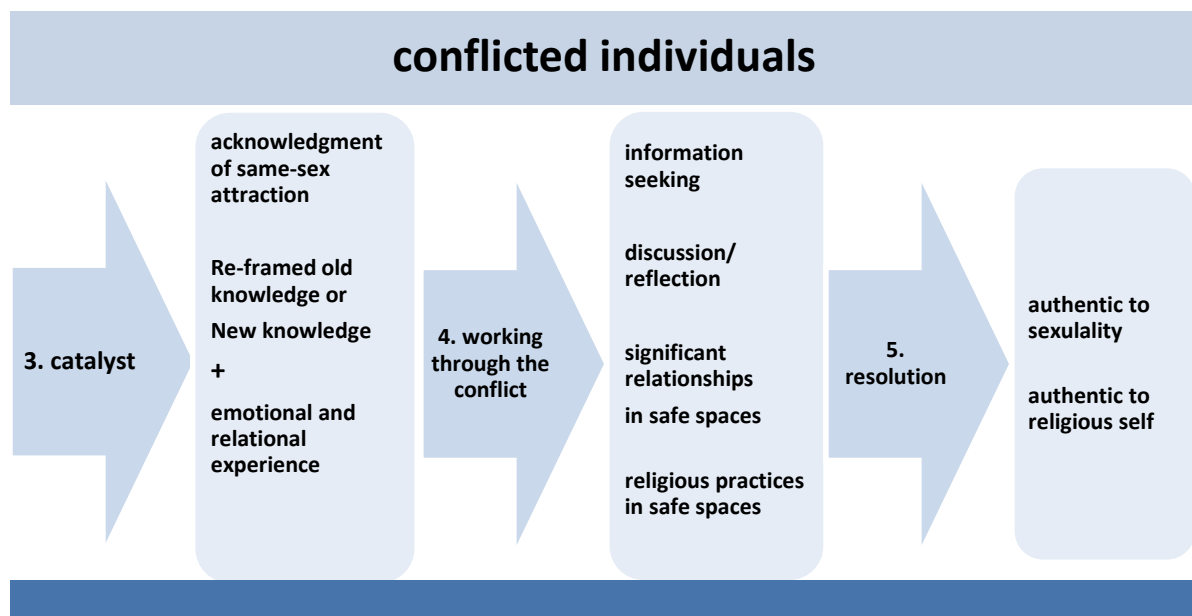


Figure 8.1: Process of resolution of conflict (conflicted individuals) – Stages 3, 4 and 5.

Stage 3: Catalytic Moments

Half (n=14) of the participants describe a memorable catalytic moment where they felt able to move forward and deal with conflict between their same-sex attraction and religious beliefs. These catalytic moments occurred at the intersection of two aspects of self, the religious and

the sexual self. For some the recognition of their same-sex attraction as real and lasting, and/or desirable, was the trigger for questioning the religious worldview. This recognition occurred through intimate relationships, which triggered powerful emotional experiences that dispelled any further questioning of sexuality. For others the disparity and tension between their feelings and doctrine was no longer tenable, and ensuing conflict was inevitable.

The catalytic moments experienced by the participants in this study enabled them to break out of the initial behaviours of denial of same-sex attraction with/without increased religious involvement, secrecy, decreased religious involvement with/without relocation and depression outlined in the previous sections. I categorise the experiences according to, first, acknowledgement of the permanency or desirability of their same-sex attraction, and, second, experiences that led to questioning their religious worldview.

Acknowledgment of same-sex attraction through relationships

Participants who denied their same-sex attraction and/or became deeply involved in religion in particular could not begin to question their previous religious worldview until they acknowledged their sexual orientation. Ruth, for example, who experienced little internal conflict between her sexuality and her religious worldview, remarks that ‘once it was resolved [sexual orientation], once I made the decision, I never had a doubt’. Recognising her same-sex attraction as legitimate was the pivotal factor which allowed her to move forward as a Christian. For Ruth this was relatively seamless but for those who experienced conflict, this process was often protracted and painful.

Arthur, for example, who was brought up in a strongly religious family, had initially denied his sexuality and experienced a high degree of internal conflict. He explains that at a young

age he booked a Pacific cruise as ‘the last chance to prove that I could be heterosexual’. He continues to describe a pivotal experience after this event:

That was a disaster in a whole lot of ways, to the point where I was so keyed up when the cruise came back and it had been two weeks of doing nothing effectively because I shared a cabin with another guy who obviously played up from time to time. And I didn’t feel at all interested in any of the people [women] I got to know. Coming home I had an encounter that frightened the life out of me. It was with another man and whoa, that was that. It made it perfectly clear that I was gay and I had to learn to live with that and deal with that. And the only place I could see dealing with that was coming to the big city. Yes, it frightened me in that it was so intense and nothing to that point had been that intense. And I knew that I had to learn to work with this or deal with this or I had to come to terms with it in one way or another and the only way I could do that was to get away from home.

The ‘encounter that frightened the life out of him’ with another male was a powerful emotional experience that shocked him into recognising the nature of his sexuality. This was an intense emotional moment, a moment that propelled him to move away from home; a move that enabled him to break old attachments and build new ones. He could begin dealing with his sexuality and eventually church doctrine. The encounter changed his reality, shifting from a cognitive idea to a lived and embodied sexuality.

For others, similar recognition of their ‘authentic sexuality’ allowed them to begin meeting other same-sex attracted people, both Christian and non-Christian. Natalie, the youngest participant who also initially tried to deny her same-sex attraction, reached a point where she realised, ‘...and when I finally did date a girl, I realised, “Oh, yeah. This is what it means. All of that [dating boys] was just pretend stuff”’. At that point she could meet other lesbians and begin the process of resolving her conflict with church doctrine. Until then, as she

explains, 'I kind of explored sexuality in the Bible...it never meant anything to me'. The emotional realisation through her same-sex relationship – 'Oh, yeah, this is what it means' – dispelled her doubts regarding her sexuality, and was the catalyst to move forward and meet other lesbians, and begin questioning doctrinal issues that until then had no meaning.

Emma was only able to recognise her same-sex attraction after spending time in therapy as a result of her depression. Through the trusting relationship with her therapist she began to recognise and acknowledge her sexuality: 'We dealt with all this stuff and within that stuff to do with my sexuality came out. And it put things into perspective. I could see all my journey, little hints of being attracted to women'. This led her to meeting a lesbian from a Catholic background with whom she could 'explore' her sexuality, saying, 'It was an incredible time, a freeing time...but just thinking, am I jeopardising my faith in order to have this, I really love this person and for the first time I feel complete'. Until Emma had recognised her same-sex attraction she couldn't begin to deal with the doctrinal issues. After this point she could begin to approach doctrine, but with a conviction that her sexuality was an authentic aspect of her identity: 'I really love this person and for the first time I feel complete'.

Reframed old knowledge or new knowledge through relationships

For other participants relationships with significant others were catalytic in that individuals were able to reframe old knowledge or receive new knowledge, either through the breakdown of an old significant relationship or the building of a new more important one. Each breakdown or rebuilding of relationships signified a movement in emotional attachments (Ahmed 2004). In the context of this analysis 'old knowledge' is awareness of alternative doctrinal interpretations which one is unable to process as meaningful, or to accept as legitimate. 'New knowledge' refers to theological interpretations that are immediately

processed as either meaningful or other knowledge that leads the individual to question previous doctrinal understandings.

Reframed old knowledge

New significant relationships or the breakdown of previously intimate relationships led to the reframing of theological knowledge that participants were already aware of. This was often experienced as a sudden pivotal realisation. For example, Luke, who was brought up within a fundamental charismatic family and deeply involved with the church, initially recalls how alternate understandings of the Bible had no meaning for him:

I've known about this gay theology²¹ for years, and I've never even allowed myself to see where it is. Because my perception was it would be just people trying to justify sin, and it would be a trap...if you start listening to the devil then he gets a little finger in and then will slowly take you over and you won't even know you've been deceived.

Luke was previously aware of gay theology but could not detach himself from the emotion surrounding it, saying that 'it would be just people trying to justify sin, be a trap'. He goes on to describe the transforming moment, notably a moment of interaction with a person close to him, where he came to question the validity of his previous worldview:

And I'm sitting there with all those Greek books around me on the floor. I'm just reading the Bible and researching and my Dad walked into the room, looked at me, and said, 'What are you doing!' And I realised – this was a

²¹ Gay theology argues that interpretation of the Bible has traditionally been influenced by patriarchal cultural and historical factors, which it exposes, offering an interpretation that affirms loving homosexual relationships as legitimate.

transforming moment because my dad was saying you're not allowed to research what the truth is. That was like the changing moment.

For Luke this was an intensely personal realisation. He says, 'It was so personal to me; it was the realisation that the people that I'd been trusting as the 'real people' had actually twisted something and caused me all this hurt. And all of a sudden the perception that these are the real guys and those are the liars [the gay theologians] just changed'. The breakdown of a previously trusting relationship, in his case with his father who had prevented him from researching what he perceived as 'the truth' was pivotal. It was a catalytic moment that enabled him to begin to question previous church doctrine. In addition, the trust that had been in his church leaders was broken, and he could open himself to interpret the 'old knowledge', the gay theology he had been aware of but distrusted, as legitimate. He could begin to detach from the sticky emotional binds of the biblical words signifying homosexuality as his emotional orientation to the 'Other' changed (Ahmed 2004).

Andrew similarly changed his views on gay theology. He could reinterpret old knowledge (gay theology) through the building of a new trusting relationship. He had despaired at the three options he faced as a same-sex attracted Christian:

Well, either you hope and you pray and you pray hard enough that it will go away and live a good Christian life, get married to a woman, have kids and live happily ever after. Well, no, that's not happening. But the disappointment to God and my parents and family and friends and everything, how do I reconcile it? Or, I remember I had it all worked out – well, the one obvious one was to live a gay lifestyle, coming to terms with everything but that would mean turning away from God. And the third one would be the worst to my mind, living a double life and feeling incredibly inauthentic and incredibly guilty the whole time.

A psychologist he was visiting explained that ‘well actually there is another theology’. Until that point, Andrew says, the ‘other theology’ had been ‘made out to be absurd’ in sermons that disparaged gay theologians. In his case, through the new trusting relationship with his psychologist Andrew could acknowledge the possibility that this knowledge was valid. He eventually was able to reconcile his same-sex attraction and theology.

New knowledge

For a small number of participants new theological knowledge was catalytic and enabled them to question their previous religious worldview. This new knowledge was in connection with emotion provoked within a relationship. For some the relationship was with an invisible but very real God. In line with other theorists of the religious experience, the encounter with God, whether through prayer or other form of communion, is a form of relationship (Bouma 2006:10). A number of participants (n=8) told of the disappointment with or anger at their God for putting them in the predicament of being same-sex attracted. Liz, for example, expresses her frustration, saying, ‘Well, if we aren’t supposed to feel this way, why isn’t God taking the feelings away’. This frustration led her to an exploration of the Bible, saying to her partner, ‘I’m going to have to go back and study the Bible for myself, and see if I can come to terms with it... And looking at all the passages in the Bible that mention being homosexual and interpreting it a different way’. Rather than new knowledge per se, disappointment in her God enabled her to release previous attachments to Bible truths, and to begin searching for new knowledge within which she could reinterpret her same-sex attraction.

For others a rebuilding of the relationship with God was crucial. Judy and Annie, who met while both were active Christians, made three trips away to meditate and pray about whether their relationship was right or wrong. Eventually, as Judy explains, we ‘definitely came back

with eventually realising that God isn't saying that we should break up'. From that catalytic moment Judy began the process of reinterpreting church doctrine.

Angela and Nathan were both introduced to a new way of thinking through a new intimate relationship that became so important to them that it enabled them to question their old worldview. They both began resolving their conflict between same-sex attraction and religious doctrine in conjunction with their partners. Angela, for example, was conflicted for more than four years, trying to deny her sexuality. As she explains, 'I was committed to the church and being straight'. She believed her same-sex attraction to be wrong, that 'this sin was so intense and so shameful in both mine and the church's eyes'. When she eventually became involved with a woman within the church, they decided they had to 'have some space and figure things out', and her partner then travelled overseas. Angela recalls:

Kari was more questioning than me and more open to other interpretations. I had been set in the Anglican mentality for a long time. She started sending me [from overseas] information from other viewpoints of how to read the Bible that I had never contemplated before. My views started to change and I started to think that maybe there was another way of being Christian; maybe God didn't think homosexual relationships were wrong.

The value of this new relationship with Kari allowed a questioning of her previously held views, enabling her to glimpse the possibility of an alternative understanding of the Bible and reframing her position within her Christianity as same-sex attracted. The sticky emotional attachment to the 'sin' and the associated entanglement with same-sex relationships engendered shame. These were slowly dissolved through the new trusting relationship.

Nathan remembers that as he recognised his same-sex attraction, 'I'd gathered the idea that if I was gay I couldn't be Christian'. Considering a relationship more important than his

religious conviction, until he met his partner he stopped attending any church. However, his partner introduced him to a new way of understanding his religious worldview, giving him a book ‘dealing with some of this stuff about sexuality in the Bible, so I read that and that was like the first time I’d really read anything that...went through all that stuff and said, “Yes, it is possible to be gay and Christian” ’.

Several of the older male members of MCC mention that a pivotal moment was meeting the founder of MCC as a worldwide organisation, Troy Perry. An ex-Pentecostal minister, Perry not only espouses the essentialist view that same-sex attraction is God-given and thus legitimate, but also emphasises the God-given nature of human sexuality per se, affirming the union of sexuality and spirituality. Arthur, for example, was very moved by Troy Perry, saying, ‘I think something that has become more apparent...is how much Troy Perry meant to my understanding of sexuality and Christianity. Yes, I knew it helped me to become more open and more aware, but now it is obvious that was quite pivotal in my experience of wholeness’. He explains that the minister of his (Uniting) church didn’t see himself as a sexual being, believing that ‘the body was evil, the spirit wasn’t...so you had to be celibate till you were married, but gays couldn’t marry, you had to be celibate, end of story’. For Arthur, this attitude to sexuality, with its conclusion leading to such injustice and, for him personally, hopelessness was resolved with hearing and reading about Troy Perry. In Arthur’s case the relationship with Troy Perry, a figure of authority with, as he perceived it, great wisdom, gave him a window of hope which allowed him to begin working through his conflict.

The catalyst was just the beginning of the positive process of achieving fusion of the sexual identity and religious worldview, living an authentic life. This continued process can be understood as the positive process of rebuilding a new framework of understanding both self

and the religious worldview and is described in detail in the following section, ‘Working through the conflict’.

Stage 4: Working through the conflict

And from that moment on – I was – I just started reading everything I could get my hands on. Like that was the changing point. But very, very quickly going through and changing, you know, you have to kind of rebuild your whole way of looking at the world, from the ground up (Luke).

The catalyst was the beginning of the positive process of working through internal conflict between religious worldview and same-sex attraction, to reach a state where individuals could feel pride toward their same-sex attraction, pride that they were living an authentic existence where their moral mandate was to embody their ‘God-given’ sexuality. Luke, quoted above, describes that after the ‘changing point’ he needed to ‘kind of rebuild [his] whole way of looking at the world, from the ground up’. Once the conflicted participants were open to new ways of being, they continued the process of resolving conflict, and employed various strategies for rebuilding their worldview, challenging the heteronormative religious worldview of their upbringing. Levy and Reeves (2011) identify information seeking, reflection, discussion and new behaviours as integral to this stage. This study supports Levy and Reeve’s analysis; however, I argue that greater emphasis should be placed on the importance of relationships and practices within safe spaces to the process of resolution of conflict (Figure 8.1: 226).

The safe place is a ‘queer’ place where the participants find affirmation of their same-sex attraction. The safe space enables and enhances the building of relationships, discussion and information seeking. Sticky emotional negative attachments to words, acts or relationships

can be slowly undone and power dynamics reversed (Ahmed 2004). In the words of one participant, 'healing' and finding 'wholeness' was enabled through the safe space of the MCC. The safe space promotes the feeling of belonging, identified by Wise, Harris and Watts (2005) as an aspect of habitus. The safe space enables a gradual transformation of habitus.

The safe place is also a place to practise a queer Christianity. For the LGBT Christians in this study, living as a Christian is a group process in which congregational and worship practices, and participation as Christians, are essential. Some of these practices can be understood as queered practices that are also integral to life as a queer Christian. The religious practices are healing and transformative, aiding the process of resolving tension and conflict between religious doctrine and same-sex attraction. New behaviours are therefore the crux of identity transformation and the development of new ways of being. The safe place is a spiritually nourishing space, for conflicted or non-conflicted alike.

Although I argue that queer religious practices conducted in safe spaces are core to the transformation of the identity of the individuals in this study, cognitive understandings are linked to this process. The importance of cognitive understandings to participants was varied. It was dependent upon upbringing, such as religious emphasis and education, age, and individual experiences. Of all conflicted participants, eight report seeking information as a crucial part of the process of working through the conflict. Three began seeking information individually; however, the majority could only realise change after combining this with discussion in a safe place. I divide the following into 'Individual wrestling with church doctrine' and 'Safe spaces'. Safe spaces enable wrestling with doctrine in connection with others. They also are conducive to the resolution of conflicted feelings toward non-

normative sexuality through relationships and emotional attachments to others and the fulfilment of spiritual needs through queer religious practices.

Individual wrestling with church doctrine

The previous section described the catalyst stage in which knowledge in conjunction with relationships stimulates individuals to question previous worldviews. In the rebuilding stage of working through the conflict, the questioning process for three individuals leads to thorough research as they wrestle with questions of doctrine. For those who are non-conflicted, wrestling with church doctrine was generally a short and uncomplicated process (Chapter 7: 199). For those who were conflicted this was often complex and extended.

For example Matt, who was deeply conflicted for years and whose catalyst was the recognition of the relativity of church doctrines, began thoroughly researching Bible truths:

I think the point at which I had totally reconciled my faith and sexuality was where I wrote Bible studies on the ‘gotcha’ passages. I spent about 30 hours researching every single passage... And it was through this research that at the end of it, I thought, I’ve had enough of this. I don’t need to research this anymore. I have reached my tipping point where I’m not going back. I had totally reconciled with this. I’m okay with me.

‘I am okay with me’ expresses quintessentially that as a same-sex attracted Christian he had resolved any tension between his sexual identity and his religious worldview. He believed he was able to express the authentic self, original self.

Perhaps out of all the participants Luke stands out as being most active in pursuing an individual wrestling with doctrine, independent of others. His search for information was sparked by the emotional transformation of attitude towards his father and church elders, as

described in the catalytic moments. After he could begin questioning his religious worldview, he began 'reading everything he could get his hands on'. As he articulates, 'You have to kind of rebuild your whole way of looking at the world, from the ground up'. In addition each Sunday Luke visited churches, both traditional and MCC, explaining, 'It was like I was getting all my information together'. Information seeking was for him both an individual process of reading books and internet sources, and relational and behavioural, in that he began visiting various churches. He understands that his emphasis on doctrine was exceptional, however, saying:

That's probably a really unusual way of processing it – [laughing] – but that was my way... My experiences tended to be that people go through the heart stuff first. And then they get to the head stuff... But what strikes me is that, I was, I was head first. And I think it was a few years after that, that I actually started the process of coming to terms with myself as an actual sexual person.

Luke self-identifies as being unusual, and maintains that most people 'go through heart stuff first'. Although Matt researched individually, this was within a Bible study group he initiated that was affiliated with MCC. My findings show that in this study the large majority sought a safe place to wrestle with doctrine, to discuss new ways of approaching church doctrine and to question previous understandings of the Bible. The process was dialogic and linked to relationships, emotions and practices.

Safe spaces: wrestling with Church doctrine

Emma, also deeply conflicted, provides a good example of an individual who passed through various stages of 'wrestling with church doctrine'. The catalyst for her was the acknowledgement of her same-sex attraction. Until this acknowledgement she could not approach doctrine at all. Being brought up in a conservative Protestant environment and

spending some time in an even more conservative church group, doctrine was deeply important to her. She initially ‘did a lot of research online’ and also made contact with an online forum to discuss issues of sexual orientation and faith. She explains, ‘I connected with people online way before I met anybody [from the church]’. From the safety of her home (and relationship) she was able to begin to explore her doctrinal issues. The online community was a place where she could relate to others with less risk to herself. Through this forum she was led to an affirming congregation.

Once Emma was encouraged and motivated through these online relationships she was able to begin questioning her religious worldview, seeking new knowledge. She soon desired ‘to speak with lots of people to really work out what I thought’. Here MCC played an important role. Emma explains, ‘I think it’s a safe place where you can ask questions and people are happy to sit down with you and talk about those things and share their journey. Coming to MCC2 and meeting people and just feeling more at peace about the whole journey has been incredible’. MCC was a safe space for Emma, where she could challenge her deeply held religious worldview and open herself up to question it. It was the place she could sit with others and ‘share the journey’.

Similarly, Lynne and Liz, a couple who experienced rejection from their previous church, attended MCC; as Lynne explains, ‘We were very accepted and I think that first 12 months we battled through a lot of the [doctrinal] issues’. Being in a safe space allowed these women to question and challenge their preconceived church doctrine. MCC was also a place to legitimise what individuals had already researched. Liz, who had been reading books on theology, says that after meeting the pastor of MCC she felt ‘very reassured about what the Bible said was what I thought it said after I’d been through all these different books’.

Interestingly, MCC congregations in this study had almost no formal structures to discuss biblical and theological issues. While all had previously offered Bible study, these were no longer on offer at the time of the interviews. In fact, some participants rued the lack of support in this area. While acknowledging that belonging to the MCC provides ‘some psychological support’, Michael explains that ‘my one difficulty is that apart from the occasional social thing and Sunday services there’s...no weekly or fortnightly Bible study’. This is endorsed by Anne, a member of MCC1 who explains, ‘It [the MCC] is a safe place to go – it’s basically friendship and fellowship... I was very disappointed when we first started going there quite regular that there was no follow-up care really. I would have personally liked to ask questions about being gay and Christianity’.

MCC1 and MCC3 both had leaflets available that offered an alternative viewpoint of the Bible verses concerning homosexuality; however, as I understand, this alone had little meaning for the participants. From the experiences of participants described above, it becomes apparent that relationships within the safe space of the MCC enabled the participants to deal with their conflicts. I suggest that for the majority of the conflicted participants a new understanding of the Bible came through the lived experience of an alternative viewpoint, manifested through relationships with others facing the same dilemma, and religious practices – all within a safe space. Sharing the journey, as Emma says, implies a sense of belonging, a characteristic identified by Dickson (2012) and Brumbaugh (2007) amongst others, as critical to the nourishment of the life of faith of LGBT Christians. The gradual re-interpretation of doctrine is one role that a safe space enables. A second benefit of the safe space is the development of emotional attachments that contribute to a re-appraisal of self.

Safe spaces: emotional attachments

Laura, a long-time member of MCC1, explains, ‘Being at MCC it’s a little bit like, see I am a good person’. Recognition of her goodness was a fundamental aspect of the transformation of identity. The moral imperatives identified previously include loving the self as a creation of God. Being recognised as good within this safe place was healing for Laura: ‘MCC has been such a big part of my healing; healing without counselling’.

This affirmation of being ‘a good person’, being loved as same-sex attracted, was a continuation from the recognition and acknowledgment of same-sex attraction that often occurred as a catalytic moment. The affirmation was a further step towards embracing a non-normative sexuality and living according to the moral imperative of ‘being true to the self’ and is indicative of transformation of religious habitus.

How the feeling of being safe contributed to finding the authentic self – the authentic sexual self – varied according to individual circumstances. Anthony, who initially felt confronted by his own same-sex attraction, explains; ‘It was very scary the first time going in. MCC was definitely aimed at our community [LGBT]...so I knew I was kind of stepping over a threshold’. For Anthony, acknowledging his same-sex attraction as legitimate was a risk and a step into the unknown. He could only do this in a safe space where he could begin to discover his authentic sexual self. He shared this experience with others, particularly those who had come from conservative families or religious traditions. Annie, for example, describes her first visit to an MCC:

And then I went with P at night time, and I’d go, like, I think that guy over there, is he a girl? Is he a boy? I really found that hard to come to terms with. Because, like, gays, they’re not normal!...Really, really strong views in my

family – very confronting for me and it was very hard to deal with... You're looking around feeling really uncomfortable – because you are like them too!

Visiting the MCC meant that they were confronting the 'Other' in themselves, and through face-to-face relationships were able to transform their emotion, from shame and disgust to acceptance and love. When the acceptance of self as good was achieved the authentic self could be expressed. The safe space enabled a 'clashing' of the religious worldview and sexuality, without which no progress would be made. Rebecca, for example, explains that meeting other same-sex attracted people was an important step for her in overcoming her own 'homophobia': 'I've completely changed the way I feel... I disagreed with homosexuality because that was what I was taught... I think getting to know gay people made me start to think that it wasn't so wrong – but I did think it was wrong'. The relationships and friendships she formed overrode and disabled the emotional stickiness of the doctrinal beliefs she had held previously. The people she got to know and now trusted gradually changed her orientation to the 'Other' (Ahmed 2004). The development of relationships and emotional attachments are the second major role of the safe spaces. The third is the enabling of religious practices.

Safe spaces: religious practices

For a large majority of the participants in this study, all of whom remain within the folds of Christianity, the third critical role of the safe place is to enable the practice of queer religious worship, which is a shared practice. As Laura expresses when asked about the most important thing for her in the MCC:

Worshipping in community. Having people. I feel better when there's more people, so greater sense of community. So worshipping within a community,

sharing communion, having a sermon that makes sense. Now in worshipping I include the singing as well.

Religious practices within the safe spaces of MCC empowered participants, and enabled them to deal with their conflict and to express the authentic self. Through relationships and embodied practices the LGBT Christians in this study strengthened their non-normative identity, and in this space found a way to negotiate their religious world view to encompass their sexuality. According to Shore-Goss (2013: 18):

Many LGBTQI Christians in churches may not understand the intricacies of queer theology, but they do understand MCC's invitation to open commensality or the practice of radical inclusive love and hospitality.

He articulates that for many LGBT Christians the lived experience is often not centred on theology but is a practiced and emotional experience. The institutional focus on inclusivity is a value prioritised by the MCC and is reflected in the congregational and religious practices. All are welcomed upon entering the church, the use of inclusive language is encouraged and the sermon preaches an inclusive message. Paul, a pastor, explains:

...and another practice [of all MCC congregations worldwide]...is inclusive behaviour, and that stems from our language, the way we make people feel welcome, the way people do things within the worship services so there are no feelings of exclusion.

The congregational and worship practices in this safe place are healing, and empowering. Participants report that communion in particular is a powerful religious practice that emphasises the inclusive love of God. This practice enables transformation of religious worldviews and feelings towards self. It contributes to the transformation of habitus. Other religious practices, such as participation in services, the performance of singing and playing

music, also contribute to this transformation. These practices of inclusivity all play a role in what Shore-Goss (2013: 16) describes as ‘radical inclusive love’. In the sections below I focus on the practices of communion, participation in service and music. Gender-inclusive language is discussed in Chapter 9, as this practice highlights tension evident within the MCC, between inclusivity, queer and traditional Christian normative thought.

The message of inclusivity is embodied in the ritual of communion and, for many, is the most meaningful and powerful of all the inclusive religious practices of the MCC. As already discussed, MCC’s practice is quite distinct from other denominations and is noted by religious scholars and researchers for its impact. Shore-Goss (2013), for example, centres on the performance of communion as representative of the radical love of God imparted by MCC, and Brumbaugh (2007) focused exclusively in her master’s dissertation on the practice of communion in the MCC.

Communion

Communion in the MCC is a powerful ritual performance. Wilcox (in Shore–Goss 2013: 2) says that ‘the habitus that conveys second class status to the world and oneself is broken during the MCC ritual’. Shore-Goss (2013: 2) continues this idea, saying, ‘A new symbolic habitus of grace and acceptance is communicated to each participant receiving communion’. Individuals were brought up with a habitus and religious worldview that legitimised and valorised heterosexuality. During communion and other performed rituals in the MCC, individuals are able to feel accepted and loved to the extent that these feelings of inferiority are eroded. Communion is practised weekly and it is through the repetitive reinforcement of the message of love and acceptance that habitus is transformed. As Arthur expresses, the value of communion is ‘when we as people respond to God’s gift and the giving of Christ on a regular basis’. Each week the LGBT Christians come up to the altar alone, as a couple, or

with friends where their value as is reaffirmed. The reiteration of the performative of communion and of group worship each week enables a new way of being Christian.

Almost all the participants who attend the MCC churches mention communion as an important affirmation of their sexuality in front of God. Peter, for example, explains, 'Going along to MCC, I guess, some of the affirming things were the communion and where somebody could go and have communion with their partner'. Vickie also recalls her first visit to MCC where, although she felt a bit strange in that 'it was a church for gay people – being at heart a conservative', she describes her response to the first communion: 'I saw two men kiss each other after their blessing, and I thought, wow, this is true endorsement [of same-sex attraction]!' Anthea also explains that the communion both affirmed her sexuality and helped her feel included and accepted, saying:

It [communion] makes me feel connected with my people. My gay people because I don't have that connection at home. It makes me feel part of that community and that it's okay to be gay and these are beautiful people and it's nice doing this with these people.

This ritual consolidates the value of the self as same-sex attracted and unites individuals. As articulated by Laura:

I love communion, that's a ritual, but I love communion. I love the ritual, I don't mind if it's done different ways, sometimes if it's done in the evening we sing it. We sing a communion song. But I love communion, so that's a ritual that I wouldn't like to see gone. I still love to sing the songs, worshipping in community, sharing communion and having a good sermon – a good message I can take away with me. So, sermon and communion and singing.

Communion as a group legitimises alternative ways of being. This ritual affirms same-sex attraction in front of a loving and inclusive God. These rituals transform habitus and it is upon the new symbolic habitus that renegotiated horizons of significance are based.

The MCC explicitly emphasises inclusivity at the table, emphasising the open table²². The majority of participants express the importance of the open table. As Emma says, ‘I love the concept that it’s an open table²³...and that anybody can come because I think that’s the heart of the gospel. You know Jesus didn’t exclude’. This sentiment is endorsed by Laurel who attends MCC1 morning service irregularly. She expresses, ‘I really like the communion and I really like that I feel embraced by the way the communion is introduced’. Rebecca, who was not brought up with communion in her childhood religious community, expresses the values that it conveys for her:

It’s nice to go up there and hold somebody’s hand and take communion and be with people and I like it when whoever’s in front says, everybody’s welcome, nobody’s different from anybody else and that wherever you come from, or where you are going – even if you don’t feel right with God, you’re welcome – can come to Him – that’s I think the most important message of MCC – it’s okay. No matter where you are on the journey, God will accept you, God loves you and you’re welcome. And that’s so special because where can you get that in any church? You never get that!

Each individual or group who take communion are physically embraced and prayed over personally by the pastor, deacon or other church member. This personal connection is extremely important for Anthea, a single woman, who says, ‘I love the communion... I like the personal communion that you get, the one-on-one!’ Anthony, who is now in a long-term

²² Congregants are encouraged to take communion together with their partner and/or friends. They approach the communion table together, and often pray as a couple or group with the minister or acolyte.

²³ Open table means that anyone, member or not, are invited to communion, to be together at the table.

relationship, declares that doing communion with his partner is the ‘highlight of the service’ for him:

Walking up to the communion and holding hands and just having communion together is just a fantastic thing. It’s such a personal thing and a spiritual thing. And a sharing thing with the person that’s praying with you – I think it’s such a wonderful thing because it brings you as a unit.

Laura similarly describes her first communion in the MCC:

We held hands, we took communion in front of a minister of God who said, ‘You are accepted, you are forgiven and you are loved’... I had tears running down and I just felt I am home. This is where I want to be.

Communion symbolises the meeting of the physical and spiritual; it is the ultimate religious experience for many of the LGBT Christians in this study. The emotions centre on being loved and accepted, in front of God together with partners and friends. The MCC becomes a place of comfort and peace, where the integration of multiple aspects of identity is fused. Laura’s relief is palpable as she expresses, ‘I am just home. This is where I want to be’. This religious experience is integral to her transforming her religious habitus.

The repetitive practice of this ritual enables change and queers Christianity. The heteronormative institution is transgressed, as LGBT couples take communion, holding hands, expressing love by kissing after communion. This is a bold statement, a performative action that not only enables personal liberation and integration of sexuality with religious worldview, but changes the institution of Christianity, albeit in small ways. Using Browne’s (2010) understanding of spaces as dynamic, produced and contested, the spaces of the MCC

are re-created, and in effect queered. The heteronormative assumption of Christian practices is transgressed in the MCC congregational spaces.

Service

A large number of the participants allude to service and participation as extremely important for the affirmation of their identity as same-sex attracted Christians. This is precisely the aspect of their religious life that was denied them in mainstream churches and the source of loss and grief. Emma explains the benefits of being involved in the MCC2:

I was also able to do things again. So, going to the Anglican Church I wasn't allowed to do anything [because of being open about same-sex attraction]. It [MCC] has given me opportunities to serve that I wouldn't get in other churches. And I love that.

Within MCC (and to a lesser degree within the affirming congregations of the Uniting Church) LGBT Christians are not only accepted but their sexuality is legitimised through being valued as active participants in services. Patricia explains the importance of service as distinct from friendship that she felt in her MCC:

And while I was very warmly welcomed...I was able to serve and that made a huge difference...and so rather than just sort of sit there as a member of the church you are actually supposed to get up and do things, so I got involved in a range of things as soon as I could... Service is probably the most meaningful thing. I suppose it's just being who you are and accepted for that.

Anthony also expresses the importance of involvement in the services at MCC3:

I do like the way that a lot of church community do get involved in the services in one way or another, whether it's singing or being acolytes.

There's a task for everyone to do. And that's really good, that makes you feel you are contributing more than just being a member of the congregation and put some money in the basket whenever it comes your way.

Music

Like communion, music is a religious practice that reaffirms individuals as same-sex attracted Christians. For example, Patricia, who often plays guitar and sings in a band, says that 'really the music is just a way of serving to me, it's not about the music'. For Mary, singing means being included: 'I love to sing! I know God loves me to sing. I knew I didn't have any voice to sing and it's [MCC] is the only place I've been accepted regards singing'. Music for others was liberating and important to their religious lives in other ways. Victoria articulates that:

I think the gift God has given me is in being able to connect with music. I thought what is the most powerful thing in my life? I remember whenever I sing. I can sing for God and that makes things okay.

The expression 'I remember' is suggestive of a deeply embodied religious habitus, accessed through the performative worship practice of singing. Victoria further explains, 'I can just sing for God and that makes things okay'. Singing brings comfort and validates her in front of God.

Others also express that singing linked them to their past. As May expresses, 'I like the old songs; that evokes my past'. This is a religious practice that connects the past memory with the present form of action that leads to a feeling of comfort. These embodied memories made evident by Victoria and May supports the conceptual understanding of religious habitus, a disposition that is both consciously and unconsciously instilled through relationships and cultural cues and symbols. Their comments are supportive of Warners (2005: 226) assertion

that music enables a ‘deep, emotional, elemental’ connection to the self. This aids in understanding why LGBT individuals remain attracted to their Christian upbringing, despite being repelled and rejected by mainstream Christianity.

Queer transgresses boundaries; in the case of the MCC it challenges the normative view of choice of sexual partner, the ‘heteronormative’. It challenges the generally understood dichotomy between Christianity and sexuality. In this way the MCC is queer. On the other hand the MCC reinforces binaries (Daniels 2010). The MCC maintains these contradictions in tension; this is the focus of Chapter 9.

Conclusion

The two stages, catalytic moments and working through the conflict, are complex processes characterised by relationships, emotional attachments and bodily ritual practices. The catalyst is triggered by relational experiences whereby individuals recognise the importance and validity of their sexuality or begin questioning their previous religious worldview. Old knowledge is reinterpreted or new knowledge gives individuals a new way of framing their sexuality within the context of their religious beliefs. For some this occurs through a breakdown in relationships with significant others and a rebuilding of new relationships in conjunction with new doctrinal knowledge. For others, knowledge that previously was illegitimate within their religious worldview becomes approachable, most often through the building of new significant relationships.

Significant relationships are relationships with ‘significant others’ (Sullivan 1940), those who matter enough to effect change in self-definition. For the purposes of this study significant relationships could be with family members, partners and peers, as well as other persons in

positions of authority such as church elders and health professionals, as well as spiritual entities, more specifically God or Jesus. These relationships contribute to the rebuilding of religious habitus. Sticky emotions attached to same-sex attraction can be dissolved and individuals can begin to recognise the legitimacy of their authentic sexual selves. Previous religious worldviews can be questioned.

The stage of working through the conflict was similarly dominated by relational elements and emotional attachments. In the case of the majority of the participants in this study the safe space of the MCC facilitated transformation of habitus and deeply held religious worldviews, allowing participants to move in directions other than restrictive normative expectations. The safe spaces enabled individuals to exercise agency and negotiate their religious worldview and habitus, in order to make their sexuality acceptable. Through relationships, cognitive questioning and bodily ritual practices, emotions toward the self were transformed; the love of God which affirmed their sexuality enabled the integration of the authentic sexuality with the religious self. Each friendship, each relationship, each service, each song and each communion disrupted heteronormative constraints. Practices subvert spaces (Gorman-Murray, Waitt and Johnston 2008; Browne 2010: 231) and spaces are queered, as in this case individuals seek to express their authentic selves.

The safe spaces of the MCC are critical. These findings are suggestive of a new way of understanding the religious experience as relational and emotional, rather than fundamentally cognitive (Riis and Woodhead 2010). Riis and Woodhead propose that emotion and dialectic relations are far more important than cognitive and rational aspects in shaping the religious experience. In this analysis new cognitive understandings, therefore, which bring previously held understandings of church doctrine into question, cannot alone necessarily effect change. Relational and emotional aspects are critical to cognitive changes.

The following chapter, 'Untroubled Christianity', delves a little more deeply into the tension between the queering of the church, in particular the MCC, and the reproduction of normative expectations and behaviours. The LGBT Christians in this study negotiated ways of being Christian in their desire to live an authentic life, seeking ways to encompass their sexuality within their religious worldview. The individuals transgressed the heteronormative Christian assumptions, finding ways to marry seemingly contradictory identities. They partook in Christian practices that repeatedly queered spaces. Through the spaces of the MCC, Christianity itself was queered as queer practices re-created these spaces. This process was multidimensional, at times contradictory, and varied from individual to individual, congregation to congregation. Chapter 10 looks at the ways in which the individuals remained entrenched in normative Christian ways of being, often at odds with cognitive understandings. Christianity, as an institution, remained therefore in some ways largely untroubled.

Chapter 9: Untroubled Christianity

You've got these five boys running the show, right, and you don't have any females, but the girls can get together and have retreats²⁴, they've had retreats for the last 14 years and the males don't even get one off... It's quite interesting really, they are quite willing to be top dog when it comes to the board, but they are not willing to submit, I guess, and go on a retreat (Annie)!

Inclusivity provides a safe place and acceptance but it does not address that question of who am I... Regardless of how inclusive they are, even MCC is going to fail. Church cannot get away from ties with the notion of family. The church is predicated on family (Sylvia, transgender).

Introduction

Subverted heteronormative practices queer Christianity in the MCC. These subverted Christian practices accommodate alternative sexualities. The MCC's space invokes 'a radically inclusive God' (Shore-Goss 2013: 2) in practice and enables LGBT Christians to worship. It provides a safe space where 'healing and wholeness' can be attained, and where the authentic self can be lived. There are questions, however, as to the extent that the MCC provides 'radical inclusive love of God' and how far Christianity is queered. In this chapter I focus on the limits of inclusivity and the extent of queerness in the MCC. Annie, for example, quoted above, expresses her frustration at continuing inequalities in the MCC. She also reveals a binary understanding of masculinity and femininity commonly expressed within the MCC. Sylvia, a transgender participant, also articulates that conceptually,

²⁴ MCC Australia has held women's retreats every year since 1999. While there has been a call for men's retreats none has ever eventuated, through lack of interest.

however hard individuals may wish to express inclusivity, the normative foundations will inexorably lead to failure.

As a Christian organisation, the MCC upholds the basic theological premise of Christianity, that the triune God is 'omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient' and 'every person is justified by grace to God through faith in Jesus Christ'. It is only through 'God's gift of grace [which] is not earned, but is a pure gift from a God of pure love, that we are saved from loneliness, despair and degradation (UFMCC Statement of Faith 2013)'. God and Jesus are greater than human beings, who should 'seek genuine forgiveness for unkind, thoughtless and unloving acts; and commit [to] a life of Christian service'. This premise leads to the conclusion that, as Plummer asserts (1995: 148), 'queer fundamentalists have no way of reconciling differences with Christian fundamentalists'. Radical feminists similarly cannot reconcile the premise of patriarchal Christianity with their fundamental principles of gender equity (Raphael 1999; Christ 2004; Kirkman 2001).

The findings of this research indicate that the traditional hierarchical construction of relationships within the institution of Christianity does remain largely untroubled. Traditional understandings of gender and family underpinned by Christian doctrine exclude queer forms of being. Sylvia highlights the struggle of transgendered individuals to 'find a place at the table'. As she expresses, 'The church is predicated on family'. The ambiguity of her transgendered experience was unable to be encompassed by the inclusivity of the MCC. The MCC challenges heteronormativity but, as will be shown, reinforces gendered binaries and traditional family structures.

The literature shows that bisexual individuals are often treated with suspicion within both the LGBTIQ community and the MCC (Daniels 2010; Toft 2010). Not only does bisexuality

present an ambiguous and problematic non-dichotomous view of sexuality that is ‘not quite formed’, it carries with it the stigma of non-monogamy (Klesse 2005: 365; Daniels 2011: 46). The MCC (UFMCC 2013) overtly and covertly encourages a normative expectation of family, privileging monogamy over other organisations of sexual relationships and thus reproducing a new normative way of being, a homonormative ideal. Homonormativity is ‘the assimilation of heteronormative ideals and constructs into homosexual culture and individual identity. It refers to politics that do not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions such as monogamy, procreation and binary gender roles’ (Positive Space Network Resource Person Manual 2010: 26; Duggan 2002).

Although the congregations I visited consciously challenge stereotypes of gender and sexuality, deeply embedded traditional normative understandings of gender and family are present to a greater or lesser degree. In this chapter I analyse the responses to ambiguity in the MCC. I suggest that on one hand space is queered through rituals and practices that subvert normative expectations of sexuality, and to a lesser extent, gender. Inclusivity through the radical love of God is practised. On the other, gendered and other normative distinctions continue to be reproduced for three main reasons. The participants are driven by the desire to be authentic to a gendered and sexed body. This essentialist understanding of sexuality and gender enables individuals to begin with the premise that they as individuals are essentially ‘good’. Second, adherence to a normative Christian habitus forms the basis for distinctions between what is right, and what is considered wrong. Third, practicing according to a renewed shared religious habitus fosters a deep sense of belonging, upon which individuals build their legitimacy as LGBT Christians and as valuable human beings.

Gender

A dichotomous or queer God?

A policy of gender-inclusive language is practised in MCC1 and MCC3 and to a limited extent in MCC2. Each congregation and each individual apprehends this policy in different ways. The pastors of MCC1 and MCC3 articulate strong support for the use of gender-inclusive language to enable the inclusion of men and women. MCC2, a congregation with a younger profile, is more flexible with its use, with the male pastor declaring, ‘At [MCC2] we don’t care if you are male or female’, concluding that gender-inclusive language is unnecessary.

Paul, the pastor of MCC1, uses the tool of gender inclusivity in a practical way, to encourage, empower and include as many people as possible. He explains:

It’s not about whether God’s a man or a woman or whatever, but it’s about removing barriers. So that everyone can feel and touch and experience God in a way that is empowering for them. So when it comes to inclusivity and gender issues, that’s [removing barriers] our driving force, to the best of our ability.

There are two major theological arguments underlying this practice: one that the nature of God is binary, containing both male and female characteristics; and, second, that the nature of God is ‘beyond gender’, a ‘queer’ God without boundaries or delineations. On the whole, in my experience as a participant/observer, the theological premise that a binary God creates essential male and female characteristics is most prominent.

Paul, for example, explains how valuable it is to ‘preach and teach the various faces of God, balance the beautiful wisdom imagery – the spirit of God that blows through people and is always feminine, and the masculine of God, God the father’. His use of gender-inclusive language stems from his belief in a dichotomous and gendered God, a balance between a God the father and the loving spirit of God, the feminine. This God is for Paul an inclusive God. While a masculine judging God excludes and separates, a comforting feminine God accepts and embraces. This is a common belief among participants who understand God as a duality of distinct masculine and feminine aspects. This God is not a queer God. However, this is a God that includes and welcomes all.

On the other hand Peter, a retired MCC minister, expresses his understanding of gender-inclusive language as stemming from a queer God, saying, ‘The case of inclusive language is trying to make God appear bigger than just a man, greater than, all encompassing’. Liz also appreciates both understandings of God, for while she on one hand believes ‘male and female come from God, so God’s got as many feminine attributes as masculine’, she also says that ‘God isn’t male or female, God is God’. This is a ‘queer’ God, a God that goes beyond the duality of male and female. Arthur illustrates vividly how he understands God in a similar way:

You can’t stuff God into label or into a concept without something being left over. It’s like the mad hatter’s tea party where he tried to stuff the mouse into the teapot. It’s impossible to define God because in doing so you are confining God and my God is too big to be confined.

A God who is not confined is a God that doesn’t judge. Luke also explains that for him ‘the experience of God is something that removes all boundaries’.

Peter, who has always been scathing towards anyone preaching against homosexuality, says, 'Look at Galatians 3: 6–9 – there's not a Jew nor Greek, there's no slave nor free, or a male or female...or gay or straight'. For him no boundaries exist, thus no judgement comes from God, only through ignorance of God. Based upon this understanding of God, Peter supports the use of gender-inclusive language as 'something we should embrace' from the theological perspective that 'God is greater than male', but adds vehemently, not because 'lesbians don't like God referred to as male!' His response illustrates one of many tensions clustered around gender in the MCC related to the use of gender-inclusive language.

Response to gender-inclusive language

The use of gender-inclusive language is to enable inclusivity. I focus on the response of the LGBT participants in this study to this stated policy of UFMCC as a gauge to measure gendered attitudes within the MCC. The response towards its use is strikingly mixed and ranges from gratitude and empowerment, to reluctant and condescending acceptance, to dismissal, even resentment. Surprisingly, responses do not necessarily conform to gendered lines.

Language does have an impact on the understanding of and relationship with God. For some women this is a successful strategy. As Judith explains:

Inclusive language has been really good for me. I never realised it, that male patriarchal system. I look back and my father beat me up...the ungendered language was making a difference. But it wasn't something I really noticed. At first, it was a bit weird, but then I realised, when it was all masculine, it was like there was a closed heaven.

This is similar to Liz, who expresses, 'My relationship with God – I'm very glad we use inclusive language, I think because I had an abusive Dad, it would be very hard to marry the idea of God being a loving God and God being a father figure'.

Both women could begin to relate to God differently and recognise that God was not necessarily masculine in the same way that they had experienced masculinity. Without this, they otherwise would both relate God and father to their childhood experiences of their own fathers, who had excluded and disempowered them. Three other women find the gender-neutral language important for their personal religious development, while many remain ambivalent.

Several men support the use of gender-inclusive language but find it unimportant for their religious growth. However, Michael draws on his 'early Christian experience with the heavy masculine wording' to fully support inclusive language, saying:

It's very much a carry-over attitude that the woman's place is in the kitchen and should not be heard. And to me that's a put-down. It's an inclusive language in whichever form it is, to my mind, exactly what it should be. It encompasses both genders and reflects the attitude of this day and age rather than something out of the 19th century.

A large number of men and women are ambivalent about its use, some hostile. Paul explains the contention it provokes:

I can really understand women being uncomfortable with the whole emphasis on the maleness of God, which by the way is not scriptural. But at the same time I do understand that there are some people for whom the maleness of God is very, very important. So we have to try and balance all of those things so that everyone can experience a relationship with God that is relevant for

them in their life journey. Now, if you are a woman who's been raped and beaten by your father, sitting here and saying, 'Our father in heaven' is going to close down maybe any chance of hearing anything positive about God... so we take away a word that can simply be a barrier.

Although Paul's desire is to include women, from a feminist point of view his attitude reproduces a traditional patriarchal response to women that is regularly evident in the interviews. Women are pathologised as being in need of assistance in order to experience God. Although the use of language is embracing and inclusive, the implications are that women are pathologically in need of concessions from a patriarchal institution.

This is also illustrated by the attitude of some male participants, who accept its use as a necessary but tiresome appeasement for women. One male MCC Melbourne congregant explains:

I am a little amused sometimes by the concern for changing the words in stuff, it's like, if it makes you happy, but really at this point we have more important things to be worried about. That's my attitude as a man. I try to be sympathetic and it's good to be inclusive...but when you start putting awkward words into replacing 'he' in a classic song, is this just going too far?

Although he does not articulate what is more important, he implies that this use of language is unnecessary and pedantic compared with more 'important things to be worried about'. It is not clear if he is criticising the over-use of gender-inclusive language used without thought for its purpose, which often overshadows the real issue, the gendered nature of Christianity.

Approximately half the interviewees, both men and women, resist the use of gender-inclusive language. One female congregant of MCC Sydney, for example, expresses her difficulty, saying, 'I don't like it! ... Like the Lord's Prayer. They have inclusive language for that! I

just find I can't do it... there's no way', explaining further, 'This is the one I know, this is the one I stick to, in saying that I don't like it, I respect it at the same time'.

While many of the men and women support its use on principle, they also express feeling strange using gender-inclusive language, as May, also from MCC1, explains: 'even the old hymns have been de-gendered much to the extent they can be and I really like that, but in my head, the 'hims' and 'hes' are still there'. Some articulate that they could only understand God as 'he': 'I was brought up with *him* as *he*'. This is illustrative of the religious habitus in which God has always been related to as he, and an emotional response against this change is elicited, despite cognitive understandings. In this way the 'sticky' pronoun retains its patriarchal power. The destabilising or queering of gendered understandings for the participants of this Christian institution only occur as much as is comfortable. The institution of Christianity is deeply imbued with patriarchy, patriarchal language and heterosexism. The religious 'habitus' with its deeply ingrained patriarchal language, concepts and beings meant many participants struggle to use gender-inclusive language.

In general the younger participants found gender and the use of gender-inclusive language less of an issue than many of the older ones, with Natalie, the youngest participant saying, 'Gender never affected me. And the fact that MCC is very gender-sensitive about saying God is a he and stuff... I don't get offended that people refer to God as he'. MCC2 used little gender-inclusive language. As one young woman comments dismissively, 'That gender language, [MCC2] is a bit less hung up on that'. To her, gender-inclusive language is restrictive. Another woman explains:

What I find hard is the inclusive language – it's just strange to me. I've never had issues calling God Father or anything like it. I guess [MCC2] is a lot more laid back about this than other MCC churches and I really appreciate

that...at [MCC2] I don't feel any patriarchy at all. It's quite even in my feeling.

The feeling of being included equally as a woman within the MCC2 culture means gender-inclusive language, with its awkwardness, is unnecessary and restrictive. In saying that MCC2 is 'less hung up on that', and 'MCC2 is more laid back', these women indicate that to them gender-inclusive language is unnecessary and superficial. There was a 'laissez-faire' attitude toward patriarchal Christianity, which indicates that the women feel empowered within their group and, second, there is a belief that MCC2 is making an impact upon gendered attitudes, dissolving gender divisions. The younger individuals held fewer emotional sticky attachments to the masculine pronouns.

The intention of gender-inclusive language is to enable and empower women. Its use is underpinned by either a dichotomous God with both masculine and feminine aspects, or a queer God who cannot be defined. These strange bedfellows, the dichotomous and queer God, however at odds with each other, go hand in hand to create a space of inclusivity and acceptance that has meaning for the LGBT Christians in this study. I contend that the emphasis on the dichotomous God, however, enables a continuation of power inequalities within the MCC as an institution, with the privileging of masculinity over femininity. The following sections focus on the ascription of gendered characteristics, specifically in relation to leadership and relations between men and women.

Ascribed Gender Characteristics – Self and Others

Gender in the MCC is challenged. Individuals transgress the normative expectation of consistent sex/gender roles and in this way expose the socially constructed nature of gender. The MCC in this sense queers the gender boundaries. However, responses to leadership

issues, to ambiguity and relationships between men and women (such as transgender and bisexuality) expose deeply entrenched normative understandings of ascribed gendered characteristics – both toward self and others.

While overall in the three churches under study women and men in leadership are fairly evenly represented, in one of the congregations men make up the majority of leadership positions. This elicits mixed responses, all of which ascribe binary gender characteristics to men and women. One of the most active women in this congregation, Laura, was complicit in male dominated leadership of her congregation, explaining that this was due to the dichotomous nature of men and women: ‘I’d love to see more women on the board but I think it’s within the nature... So I’m too sensitive to be on the board, I thrive with congregational care’. She ascribes leadership characteristics to males and in doing so enables the reproduction of patriarchal structural values.

As she explained the gender binary to me, she realised that perhaps there were, however, fuzzy borders, saying, ‘I sometimes think God suits men, and Jesus suits softer beings – I shouldn’t just say women – God as an authority figure suits people who look for an authority figure and where Jesus suits people who want the close relationship, perhaps’. Laura says that her role is aligned with Jesus, who exhibits feminine qualities that she feels she can exemplify.

Later she continues to describe the nature of women and men as distinct: ‘Well, I think the evening service suits the nature of women, it’s soft, gentle, the lights are down... I think the evening is a lot closer to what Jesus would’ve instigated’, whereas the morning service with ‘marching songs and strict ritual’ is accepting of authority. Laura reiterates the emphasis on Jesus, saying that Jesus was ‘more embracing of females as anyone else at the time’, and is ‘a

liberator of females'. Her understanding of the role of Jesus is in line with Heyward's (1999) feminist theological approach to Jesus as a Jesus who struggles for equality and justice, a far more egalitarian Jesus, a non-authoritarian, existential Jesus described by Carroll (2007).

Laura's traditional, dichotomous understanding of gender is shared by the minister, who understands God to have clear masculine and feminine characteristics, the strong 'God the father', and the feminine, soft and gentle 'spirit of God that blows through people and is always feminine – the beautiful wisdom imagery of Sophia, the wonderful Old Testament thing'. He respects the two women who are deeply involved in the church, describing them as 'matriarchs' without whom 'the church couldn't work'.

Many of the women understand that a change of attitudes towards women within the church is necessary. The majority suggest that 'change comes slowly', as Victoria says. She continues, 'Church reflects society... I think it's about strong women standing up, I believe, with love in their hearts and leading through love'. She explains that for her as a positive person she believes change will come for women (and has already occurred) through 'patience, persistence and perseverance', that 'I know if I wait long enough [change] will be even sweeter when we get there'. Her assimilationist attitude ascribes stereotypical feminine characteristics to women as 'waiting and being patient', and of being 'loving'. She also exhibits a realistic understanding of the inertia of change.

There is a high degree of separation between men and women in MCC1 morning congregation. Laura describes initially coming to a service which consisted of all men: 'the service was wonderful, but after the service, no-one spoke to us over a cup of tea. We were the only women there but no-one, not even the pastor, spoke with us'. She and her partner, far from being discouraged, recognised the need for women, 'offering that softness, that love,

that openness, that welcoming, nurturing nature of women in a church of men who don't necessarily experience that a lot'. The women ascribe as natural the feminine characteristics of 'softness, love and welcoming' to women in general, reflecting the essential understanding of God-given dichotomous gendered characteristics.

Ascribing masculinity as being 'more suited to being on the board' as Laura does, becomes problematic when issues of power are attached to this difference. Annie, for example, is not patient and at times is less forgiving. She expresses frustration at the gender imbalance, saying, 'I would like to see, not that I would personally do it, but I would like to see a woman on the board, and I think, a lot of the decisions...on the board – they are men, so they are male focused, and there is a lot of controversy'. She adds that despite men being in leadership positions, in contrast to the women, they cannot 'get it together' to organise a retreat as 'they are not willing to submit'. Annie expresses a binary view of masculinity and femininity, revealing her understanding of masculinity to be dominating and individualistic, where men were unable or unwilling to work together to organise a retreat. This is interesting, as Annie herself identifies as fairly masculine and anti-social.

The response to women in leadership is mixed. There are tensions surrounding the issue of leadership in the MCC, with two men expressing frustration at women. Peter, for example, comments that despite 'a congregation of gays and lesbians [being] fairly refreshing', the past female leadership of the church was 'a mob of fairly vicious women'. Luke too, who at this time attends a congregation with little tension between men and women, explains that in the past he had felt there was a bitter division between 'gay politics' and 'lesbian politics' and recalls how 'each wanted him on their side'. For him what was initially empowering for women, 'taking our place at the table', becomes an 'angry, aggressive thing'. Women are pathologised for expressing 'masculine' characteristics of anger and aggression.

Others are extremely positive towards having women in leadership assigning positive feminine characteristics; for example William exclaims:

Women make better leaders than men. I think they've got warmth, more so than a man, and a man tries to keep his position. But a woman is more relaxed, more gentle, and that keeps the group together.

He understands that the ascribed feminine characteristics of gentleness and warmth together with group thinking enable women to be good leaders. Others resist assigning gender characteristics to women, with one male interviewee expressing, 'It is the person and what they are saying that is important to me', and the other, 'I've worked with men, I've worked with women... There have been difficult men, and difficult women... I have trouble with difficult people'.

Queering Relationships

One MCC3 congregant describes his congregation as having fluid gender expression: 'Well, you see it here in Melbourne; J is the epitome of the handy woman. She'll climb on the roof and fix something electric...you'll find one of the guys baking for supper...there's a certain freedom there'. He explains the benefit is that 'there's a blend of talents that might otherwise not be known'. He also articulates that enabling more fluid gender expression means that in MCC 'People can be themselves without any concern for being ostracised'. He makes conscious efforts to challenge gender stereotypes, to fuzzy the edges of the masculine/male, feminine/female expectations by, for example, wearing sarongs to church or beads at work.

Others experience freedom in their relationships through lack of distinction between male and female, facilitated by a queering of gender expectations and norms within the LGBT

community. Nickie, a member of MCC3, explains, 'There's no difference with gay people. There's five women in the church and about 20 men. And yet I feel like one of the boys and they feel like one of the girls'. She continues to explain, 'I always feel they're my brothers and sisters. It just feels the same gender to me'. While she still distinguishes between 'the boys and the girls', she feels the borders are fluid or permeable, and she feels 'like one of the boys'. This leads to a certain freedom of expression, and a freedom in relationships, which she understands enables her to feel as close as 'brothers and sisters'.

Perhaps the closest to a queer congregation was MCC2. The present pastor explains, 'When MCC2 started we were at a church where it's not just about women taking their place at the table and not putting women down either, it's just about, we don't care if you're male or female'. He continues, 'God removes all divisions...the gender stuff; I don't really have to think about it...I shrug it off. It doesn't matter to me'. This is echoed by another male member of the congregation: 'gender is not important in MCC2...women can serve Christ just as well as any man and can be the hands and feet and part of the body'. This sentiment is supported by the women. As one woman described when asked about gender in MCC2, 'They treat men and women equally and you will notice that men and women will take an equal part in each service...and I think there is a strong feminine identity in that church'. Two women discuss leadership, one saying, 'It's not about gender, it's about who has the gifts to do the job, who's called', the other that '[MCC2] showed no distinction between male and female in leadership. Females can preach, females can have the same input. I think MCC is different'.

Four of the six interviewees from MCC2 insist that 'gender didn't matter'. I was initially not convinced, but their assertion was strengthened ironically by their lack of interest in gender-inclusive language, or in fuzzifying the gender boundaries through emphasised expressions of,

for example, dress or gesture. One member of MCC2, for example, articulates, ‘Physically I am male, I have always identified as male, but when I was very little I knew I was a girl, and when I dream I’m always actually a woman in my dreams’. He adds that ‘it has never been something that has caused me trouble or distress...it doesn’t matter to me’. While he is one of the only participants who describes his gendered identity so clearly (with the exception of the two transgendered interview participants), younger congregants express a similar sentiment, that they were disinterested in gender distinctions.

The youngest interview participant explains, ‘I don’t think gender bothers God, and I don’t think gender should bother humans’. Leadership and participation in services in which young people predominated (MCC1e and MCC2) is shared between the sexes; in addition men and women socialise easily, and don’t feel the need to exaggerate and/or bend gender identity. As one female MCC2 congregant expresses, ‘I think for my Christian journey, whether I am gay, straight or bisexual, a man or a woman, I think that wouldn’t matter in MCC2...because they’re cool’.

Response to Ambiguity

The response to the transgendered congregants is illuminating. Fellow congregants in the MCC show a group tendency to define and delineate, and at times ‘Other’ those different, despite being themselves excluded by the heterosexual majority. Anthony describes his initial discomfort with transgender:

Something interesting...we had the transgender day the Sunday before and I’m as guilty as a lot of people are, I’ve met but I don’t know any transgender people. And I realise how challenged I was by that. And I took that as a good lesson that we are a marginalised group so we’ve got to be really careful

we don't marginalise people within our group, because otherwise we are guilty of what some of the other larger faiths do to us. That takes a transgender person or the other individual that's a bit more unique within our community to help us do that too. It's got to be a two-way street.

He reflexively interrogates his own response with the desire to be inclusive. Anthony recognises the tendency to judge, and responds positively to the challenge, to use the challenge of difference to become better as a Christian. His desire to live non-judgementally is challenged by the gender-queer expression of transgender. Michael also describes the confusion felt by members of the congregation at a time when a transgender woman was preaching, exclaiming, 'You never knew whether you are going to be preached to by Bill or Betty'. He continues to describe how difficult it was for both the preacher and the congregation due to the unclear gender distinction, yet explains how this gave the congregation 'the opportunity to just gently accept people as they are – it's important for their spiritual well-being'.

Others are less reflexive in their attitudes to transgender, as illustrated by one female congregant:

When that last retreat was on I got asked to do some leading the small groups up there, and the sessions. And I got put in with – there was a married lady, and there was a transgendered person, and just the 'motley crew' [one of us]. And you really couldn't get anything going – discussions – because the transgender would just say the answer is yes, or no. You know like blokes do.

This attitude expresses the commonly held (mis)understanding that while being a trans-woman, she is 'really a man'. In this case, the trans-woman's gender is not recognised as being legitimate. Again masculine and feminine traits are identified and used to legitimise

and de-legitimise, to create boundaries. The congregant identifies with ‘the motley crew’, separating herself from the ‘married lady and the transgendered person’, creating renewed ‘hierarchies of worthiness’ (Stryker 2008). The ‘motley crew’ however signifies belonging and safety that cultivates the feeling of love for the self, and the development of legitimacy as same-sex attracted Christians.

This attitude to the transgendered individual illustrates how difficult it is to actually live ‘queer’ and how entrenched are gender and sexuality in individual and group identity. It also indicates a dichotomous understanding of gender roles – in this case that men are unable to discuss and cooperate, but simply see issues in terms of ‘yes or no’.

Bisexuality also challenges binary thinking. According to one participant, bisexual individuals ‘don’t really belong in either camp. Even though it’s LGBT it’s never really.’ Only one participant identifies positively as bisexual. Two women say that they could identify as bisexual but don’t, considering there to be a biased negative attitude toward it. The above interviewee continues:

Nobody, nobody likes – I just hate that term [bisexual], I hate the idea behind it. And when I was actually – I went into this lesbian house talk...and they said that bisexuals have the highest suicide rate, the highest...and the highest depression rate and the highest this and that.

The discomfort felt by others toward transgender and bisexuality is indicative of the emotional investment in normalcy and coherence. Even Nova explains how bewildering it is for her: ‘Now I wake up and I don’t know if I’m Arthur or Martha! And I think it’s okay, but it’s bewildering for me’. The trans-women disrupt gender roles and expectations, creating discomfort. From birth, gendered characteristics and roles are culturally reinforced

repetitively and continuously. Transgender individuals transgress these clearly defined boundaries, doing gender differently, unsettling themselves and others. The response from the members of MCC is either reflexive, eliciting inclusivity, or reactive, reproducing normative binaries.

Being Transgender

Gender roles and ascribed binary characteristics are also ironically reinforced by the transgendered individuals themselves. The two transgender participants illustrate the power of gender as a defining factor of identity, challenging queer ways of being. While both trans-women transgress the consistent sex/gender role boundaries and expectations, they reproduce normative gendered understandings. Femininity, for these women for example, is highlighted and emphasised in dress and behaviour. They both dress in elegant frocks and apply large amounts of makeup, emphasising their femininity. Feminine characteristics are also highlighted, with both women expressing sensitivity and gentleness. Both also understand their femininity as essential – as a previously undiscovered aspect of their essential and God-given self.

Sylvia, for example, explains, ‘I read about cross-dressing, about men I identified with. That was startling! It was words like ‘gentleness’ that was used. I thought, “Hang on a minute, that’s describing me!”’. She also describes the moment she bought her first wig:

I sat down in the store and tried it out. I thought, ‘Oh, shit!’, it feminised my face...and the face I saw, as opposed to just ‘that’s my face’, this one I recognised. There was a recognition there; ‘that’s me’! and so I knew, literally, yes, seconds, life was not going to be the same.

She then, in her words, ‘unpacked that awareness over the next few weeks, shedding a lot of tears, and re-lived memories that now began to make sense. Twenty, thirty years of things that just didn’t make sense now began to make sense’. The confusion of not understanding, of being alone with contradictory gendered impulses, such as buying feminine hygiene products, began to be slowly resolved. As Sylvia explains, the ‘brain is female in male body, and there is nothing to help; you cannot deny it, bury it, and I knew there was no alternative’.

Nova also recognised from an early age the essential feminine within herself. She was seeking a femininity that resonated with her, as until that time, she explains, ‘I see that lesbians and drag queens can sometimes be so aggressive. I cannot accept that particularly in drag queens. I find that they are very attractive but when they started to speak, I find that repelling. I’m not that person’.

Both Nova and Sylvia describe clear pivotal moments when they recognise or have a glimpse of their ‘true’ gendered selves. On one hand gendered expectations are challenged, on the other the essentially understood traits of femininity or masculinity are propagated, albeit in differently sexed bodies. This also raises the question of authenticity. The trans-women recognise their ‘true gendered selves’ in pivotal moments that evoke the desire to discover and explore their authentic self. In pursuit of the authentic essential self, both Nova and Sylvia queer space and to a degree queer Christianity. As Sylvia exclaims, ‘I took God seriously from day one. And that’s been the driver for my transitioning’. Her Christian God is empowering her to transition, to transgress the binary of sex/gender. Her enacted queer Christianity is driven by the search for the authentic God-created self. For Sylvia it is a moral imperative to discover that essential queer self. This reveals an unresolvable tension between the desire to discover an authentic self, and the means to attain this.

Patriarchy, Monogamy and Family in the MCC

Further indicators of adhesion to normative Christian habitus are evident when investigating attitudes to patriarchy, monogamy and family in the MCC. Essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality give rise to this attachment, which is bound up with relationships and emotions. Relationships with God and Jesus and emotional attachments within the congregations nurture the feeling of belonging and take precedence over cognitive objections to patriarchal overtones. Fulfilment, for many of the participants, comes through the practice of religious faith.

Patriarchy

Very few participants in this study understand Christianity as explicitly patriarchal. In fact, one woman overtly expresses, 'I don't feel any patriarchy at all'. Another, however, comments upon the content of the sermons in her congregation. Despite the best efforts of the pastor who, in his words, 'preaches and teaches on the various faces of God', Anthea explains that as opposed to Catholicism where 'they talk more about the female characters, you don't hear that here. You are always hearing about the disciples'. She muses on the lack of women in the congregation, exclaiming, 'Some of those readings are fiery! ... They seem to have a lot of anger. Maybe that's why women don't go to it... Especially that [biblical] Paul; the language is a bit aggressive almost'. Anthea recognises the patriarchal nature of the MCC she attends, ascribing masculine gendered characteristics to it. She equates angry, fiery and aggressive with masculinity. Anthea, however, loves the MCC, finding a sense of belonging in the inclusivity and solace in the friendships. The relationships she has developed take precedence over her cognitive objections.

Those women in MCC, who attempt to modify Christianity by changing it from within, do so by expressing the need for ascribed feminine characteristics of love and patience. They experience the love of God and Jesus, and the support of community that enables them to find comfort in the church. The fact that some women in the MCC cognitively recognise the patriarchal attitudes within it, yet remain steadfastly Christian, also supports the understanding that the religious experience is fundamentally emotional and relational.

Monogamy

Although my interviews did not focus on the organisation of relationships, there was a consensus amongst those I talked with that monogamy is preferable; while polyamory did not enter the discussion, promiscuity is understood as incompatible with the church teachings. The bylaws of UFMCC (2013) articulate that ‘the rite of holy union/matrimony is the spiritual joining of two persons’. Most participants are in long-term committed monogamous relationships. Matt, for example, expresses with pride that this year he and his partner are celebrating their 21st anniversary together.

Two participants explicitly describe promiscuity as immoral. According to Anthea:

I mean, it sounds judgemental, but I struggle a bit with some of this gay scene where they are, particularly the men, with their promiscuity and yet they go to church. I don’t understand that part. But that’s just, I think, that’s the male, particularly the male gay scene. And I think anything goes. I don’t always understand how they can do that with Christianity. I would feel a bit of conflict about going to church being that kind of person that I believe God wants me to be, and then I’m going out there, you know, sleeping around and doing things that maybe I don’t think for me are morally right. It would be hard to come to church asking for forgiveness. It is all right to ask forgiveness, but you go out and do the same thing again.

Anthony too, having at one time lived fairly promiscuously, explains:

I'm in a monogamous relationship and I don't need any of that stuff [promiscuity] anymore and it never satisfied myself anyway... But ultimately I think most people are looking for intimacy with someone. And that's not about the five minutes of pleasure, that's about something more... It's commitment and the things that come with that.

This commitment to normalcy is common, not only in terms of sexual relationships, but also expressed in the desire to celebrate services traditionally. As one older congregant explains proudly to her heterosexual friend:

I could blindfold you and take you in there and you'd hear the sermon and you wouldn't know you were in a gay congregation. Because they never say, 'Not like those, straight people' or anything like that. You'd never know. If she didn't see the people, she wouldn't know where you were.

By ascribing to normative Christian practices she feels legitimised. The commitment to monogamy, also a normative Christian practice as expressed above by Anthea, excludes and 'Others' those who do not live according to this practice. Monogamy is closely related to the family, a contested and changing institution (Schwartz 1987). For the participants of MCC family was generally understood as based upon monogamous relationships. The institution is constrained within normative Christian expectations. 'Family' is also central to the feeling of belonging, and the re-working of a religious world view which included non-normative sexualities. Within 'family' space religious habitus could be transformed through the building of new significant relationships, as discussed in Chapter 5 and illustrated in Chapter 8. However, 'family' is also a contested sticky word, a word and concept that can exclude.

Family

‘Family’ is also an example of a sticky word that elicits emotional responses. There are continual references to ‘brothers and sisters’, to ‘coming home’ (discussed in chapters 7 and 8), and the importance of family to the building of inclusive spaces in order to discover and live according to the authentic self. These words, however, exclude some forms of being, and reinforce gendered binaries of those who belong and those who don’t. As Sylvia expresses:

Church cannot get away from ties with the notion of family. The church is predicated on family. There are people out in the community for whom family is just too painful. They’ve [the church] got to address questions of how do we keep family and reach out to people to whom family is just too painful and do it in a way that is meaningful.

Sylvia expresses the importance of and desire for family. She is, however, critical of the exclusions the word ‘family’ engenders. Family as she understands it also excludes ambiguity. It excludes non-monogamous relationships. For her relationships are complex and ambiguous, and at times a fluid mix – which is not encouraged or understood within the normative space of the MCC.

Conclusion

In real life, and in real relationships, gender matters. Despite the queering of heteronormative space in all the four congregations and a fluid expression of gender across sexed bodies, a dichotomous gender construction appears resistant to change. For the majority of the same-sex attracted Christians in the study gender is understood as a God-given created essential characteristic. This understanding holds that both male and female characteristics are

necessary to express the fullness of Gods nature. Ironically the transgendered individuals who challenged gender dichotomies also understand gender as essential, displaying ‘emphasised femininity’ (Connell 1995). Gender is understood as an essential and substantive reality that is performed in order to live an authentic existence. There is a strong emotional investment in the adherence to an essential understanding of gender. This is illustrative of the tension between the queering of Christianity and the search for the authentic self.

Power issues associated with the gender dichotomy in the church spaces were evident. This is especially apparent in one congregation where a patriarchal leadership is upheld by the more traditional Christian representation of gendered difference. Masculinity is privileged, being understood as suited to leadership and to guiding others, and is valorised. Femininity is constructed as caring, as gentle and healing, in a supporting role. At the intersection with Christianity, the dichotomous construction of male and female leads to a greater or lesser degree the maintenance of power imbalances. Both institutional and individual habitus reproduce gendered stereotypes, despite institutional efforts such as the use of gender inclusive language. Gender clearly mattered, and I argue is a powerful and deeply meaningful social characteristic that still remains attached to hierarchy, position and power.

Second, the response to ambiguity in the MCC is indicative of the normative Christian habitus upon which individuals create meaning. Romantic monogamous relationships are prioritised. The essentialist understanding of an authentic sexuality leads to bisexuality being viewed as an ‘immature’ state. Ambiguity disturbs individuals. Ambiguity threatens the safe spaces that are created in the MCC. Individuals feel safe in spaces that are unsurprising and in some sense ‘normative’. I conclude from this that the queering of religious space occurs insofar as the individual and group needs are met in the desire to live an authentic life. This

does not occur if the queering violates existing 'horizons of significance', a product of a Christian normative habitus. It does not occur if emotional bonding is to occur according to shared beliefs and religious habitus. The MCC, despite challenging heteronormative mainstream Christianity creates its own 'homonormative' space.

Chapter 10: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

This thesis describes the lived experience of committed LGBT Christians. Using qualitative methods, including participant observation and in-depth interviews, I have developed an account of the aspirations and experiences of the participants in this study. Given the hostility toward LGBT Christians from both a large proportion of Christian denominations and the wider LGBTIQ community, their experience is at times traumatic and painful, yet is also transformed as deeply rewarding.

Drawing on Taylor (1991), Ahmed (2004), Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and queer theory, this thesis makes a unique contribution to theoretical understanding of the experience of LGBT Christians. It is one of the first to apply Taylor's concept of an ethic of authenticity to the experience of the strongly religious same-sex attracted individuals. I demonstrate that the LGBT Christians act according to moral mandates based upon an ethic of authenticity in discovering and expressing their 'true' sexuality and/or gender. This is magnified by their religiosity. Some individuals struggle with the integration of their sexual, gendered and religious identities. Using Bourdieu's understanding of religious habitus and Ahmed's understanding of emotion as being 'done', I further theoretical understanding of the transformation and integration of religious and sexual identities. I have proposed and demonstrated that transformation of religious habitus is a complex process, driven by emotion within relationships and religious practices, in conjunction with cognitive factors.

The product of living according to an ethic of authenticity and a transformed religious habitus is a form of queer Christianity. I have highlighted the importance of safe spaces within

which LGBT Christians worship, and the centrality of queer practices to the fulfilment of an authentic life. However, while these spaces are queered, this study has analysed and exposed limits to the queering. There are resistant structural constraints within the institution of Christianity that are produced and reproduced within the congregations of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). While heteronormativity is subverted and queered, gender and other normative Christian structures remain relatively unchallenged.

This chapter briefly recaps the key research findings, and related theoretical arguments, in the context of previous research. I then discuss theoretical implications of the research findings and finish by outlining limitations of this project and suggestions for future research.

Key Research Findings

Ethic of authenticity

Chapter 6 demonstrated how the LGBT Christians in this study are motivated by an ‘ethic of authenticity’ to express their ‘true’, sexual, gendered and religious selves. This desire is amplified by their religiosity, which positions their sexuality and gender as ‘God-given’. According to Taylor (2007: 475), ‘each of us has his/her own way of realising our humanity’. For the LGBT Christians, realising their unique humanity is integrated with the essentialist argument of gay theology (Comstock 1993), that God created each person in his own image, just as ‘He wanted them’. Warner (2005) suggests that this belief and emphasis on essentialism is a finding common to most ethnographic and sociological studies, in particular those which concentrate on men (Gross and Yip 2010; Wolkomir 2006; Lukenbill 2005; Primiano 2005; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Thumma 1991; Yip 1999, 1997a and 1997b). Whether this is applicable to women is debatable, but according to Wilcox (2002: 504),

amongst religious lesbians ‘essentialism reigns supreme’. This study supports her assertion, in that essentialism and the connected desire to express the ‘true’ gendered and sexual self is common to all participants, male and female.

Coming out, both to self and others, as a ‘true gendered and sexual self’, is experienced as a moral mandate when living according to an ethic of authenticity. Coming out is also understood as a religious rite. The majority of participants in this study maintain that in order to be ‘a true Christian’ they are propelled to express their ‘true’ sexuality, firstly to themselves and secondly to others. ‘Coming out’ in Christianity is a central theme of much literature in this field. Drumm (2005) and Wilcox (2002) recognise the importance of coming out in the lives of LGBT Christians. Shallenberger (1998) articulates coming out as a spiritual journey. Comstock (1993), Gorman (1997) and O’Brien (2007) describe how ‘coming out’ for a Christian magnifies the religious experience, relating intimately with Jesus’s suffering. According to O’Brien, this becomes a ‘raison d’être’. These sentiments are expressions of living an ‘authentic Christianity’. This thesis supports the conclusion drawn by Speakman (2009) and Rives (2005) who both link the coming out process and the integration of a sexual and religious self for Christian lesbians with authenticity. Speakman ascribes the qualities of ‘uncompromising’ and ‘genuine’ to the way lesbians express their Christian faith. Rives understands the integrated self as being ‘dynamic and authentic’. For (Abes and Kasch 2007) the intra-sections of these separate but fused strands of identity are also arguably the expression of a ‘queer’ self.

To express the true religious self, individuals act according to an ethic of authenticity, in that they are guided by ‘horizons of significance’ (Taylor 1991), based upon their Christian habitus. This meant their practices are guided by moral mandates, such as to love God and Jesus, to love others and to love the self. Religiosity motivates the individual’s desire to

resolve any internal conflicts they may have in integrating their sexuality, gendered self and religious self.

Internal conflicts

Chapter 7 examined how the LGBT Christians respond to the dilemma of being same-sex attracted or gender-questioning given their religious upbringing and societal attitudes to same-sex attraction. Some LGBT Christians experience conflict between their sexual, gendered and religious identities. In order to express the ‘true’, original self, the participants in this study exert individual agency and create conditions of belief that enable them to integrate their sexuality with a renewed Christian worldview, a new religious habitus.

In this study all participants are aware of the tension between their sexuality and their Christian worldview; however, not all experience this as internal conflict. For 11 of the 28 interviewees the sense of self was not affected upon becoming aware of their non-normative sexuality or gender, nor were they driven away from their faith. I propose that those who were initially not internally conflicted were guided by a religious habitus that provided ready-made tools to negotiate their same-sex attraction within their faith. This could be cognitive ‘theological capital’ as suggested by Yip (2005: 49), in combination with relational and emotional experiences through which they could recognise and experience God’s love for them. This love was translated into a love for their own originality, including their sexuality. It was a moral mandate to express their God-given sexuality. This finding also supports understandings of religion as less driven by cognitive understandings and more fundamentally emotional and experiential (Riis and Woodhead 2010).

The remainder (n=17) experienced initial internal conflict between their sexuality and/or gender and their Christian worldview. All but one had resolved this conflict at the time of the study. The internal conflict individuals experience varies in intensity and duration, depending on religious background. This study indicates that those who come from fundamental and orthodox churches experience more internal conflict, in line with the findings of Barton (2010). For those who were conflicted the moral dilemma was based upon a religious worldview and habitus that did not encompass their same-sex attraction. Their religious habitus excluded same-sex attraction as a choice.

An initial finding was that on average the younger interview participants in this study experience a higher degree of conflict than the older. Upon investigation, I found the younger participants in the congregations I visited came from more fundamental and charismatic Christian backgrounds and were drawn to MCC congregations that offered a modern, charismatic approach. The intensity of conflict is therefore connected with the fundamental Protestant Christian worldviews of their upbringing, rather than their age. Those from liberal Protestant backgrounds experience far less internal conflict than those from extremely conservative or fundamental charismatic backgrounds. This finding is supported by Fitzpatrick (1993), whose research into prejudice indicates that fundamentalism leads to less acceptance of homosexuality. LGBT Christians who grow up with a fundamental religious habitus are enculturated into an internalised homophobia.

Second, in relation to internal conflict, this study finds little difference between women and men. Although Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000), Shokeid (2005) and Speakman (2009) indicate that women experience less conflict than men, the present research uncovers little difference. Rodriguez and Ouellette postulate that women are less directly affected by the biblical verses that condemned homosexuality. In this sample, however, upbringing is more

instrumental in effecting intensity of conflict. The women who came from conservative backgrounds initially felt more troubled by their own sexuality than those from liberal religious backgrounds.

For the transgender participants the conflict is exacerbated by the complex intersectionality of gender identification and sexuality. However, both transgendered participants expressed the vital importance of religion to their transitioning and their daily life. Their faith is a stabilising factor that is deeply integrated in their sense of self.

As a result of the internal conflicts individuals experienced and their desire to express their true sexuality, gender and faith, the LGBT Christians in this study sought to resolve this, exerting individual agency and creating conditions of belief that enable them to integrate their sexuality and/or gender with a renewed Christian worldview, a new religious habitus. I argue in this thesis that this transformational process is emotional and enacted through cognitions, relationships and practices.

Transformation

Chapter 8 centred on the building of a renewed life of faith that was for many participants, previously shaken. To understand how individuals integrate seemingly conflicting identities, it is necessary to understand the basis of religious faith. I propose that transformation of identity is enmeshed with a transformation of habitus. Religious habitus is resistant to change as it is rooted historically, in dispositions and ways of thinking, feeling and doing. However, it too can be changed, notably in ‘unexpected situations’ (Navarro 2006: 16). For the individuals in this study their ‘unexpected situation’ is the awareness of their non-normative sexuality or gender in the case of the transgendered participants.

Religious habitus is also dialogically developed over time, and therefore cannot be changed in isolation. In line with theorists such as Mead (1934) and Taylor (1991) who consider identity development as dialogic and in relation to ‘significant others’, identity is thus always changing as people and others become more or less important. I argue that the religious habitus of individuals can only be changed relationally, through emotions, cognitions and religious practices.

While it is possible to express religiosity alone, practising ritual as a group focuses and magnifies the religious experience. This group experience cannot be divorced from identity. The LGBT Christians demonstrate that individuals can alter their religious habitus over time by acting according to inner moral mandates. Internal conflict occurs when the moral mandates based upon their habitus do not include same-sex attraction. Their faith is tested, questioned and individualised. For the deeply religious individuals in this study, ‘horizons of significance’ (Taylor 1991) based on relationships with God and Jesus guide them to ‘come out’ and express their ‘true’ selves, whether sexual, gendered and religious.

There is a process of change. Before some individuals can question their religious worldview, they experience a ‘catalytic moment’, a term borrowed from Levy and Reeves (2011). This is a sudden recognition of the need to change or that their previous worldview may not be God’s will. It is an empowering moment. I have demonstrated that relationships are the site for emotional ‘catalytic moments’. In some cases cognitions are altered in conjunction with newly formed significant relationships or through the breakdown of old relationships. Rather than ‘new knowledge’ alone, as postulated by Levy and Reeves (2011), I have added nuance to this, arguing that cognitions alone cannot effect change. Emotions within relationships change orientations to the ‘Other’. Through relationships, knowledge is either understood as legitimate or rejected as illegitimate.

Second, and critical to transformation, the study indicates that shared religious practices are vital to changing religious habitus. There is debate as to the role of the institution in the integration of conflicting identities amongst LGBT Christians. I have demonstrated in Chapter 8 that while individual agency is exerted, the institution is vital to the transformation of religious habitus and personal legitimization. Thumma (1991); Primiano (1993); Gorman (1997), Kirkman (2001); Wilcox (2003) and Yip (1999, 2005) argue that individual agency is central to the process of integrating religious worldview and non-normative sexuality. The institution, ritual, relationships and socialisation either support this process, or are the last step in a long individual process. They argue that individual identity integration and transformation occur independently from these group processes.

Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) and Brumbaugh (2007) argue, on the other hand, that the gay affirming congregation with its ritual is crucial to the process. My findings support the latter argument, as although individuals exert agency in their own transformation this is always done within the context of transformation of significant relationships and the enactment of ritual within the group. The experience of belonging and of being in family is powerful and enabling and over time alters religious habitus.

Queer Christian spaces?

A product of the desire for authenticity and the transformation of religious habitus, the institution of Christianity is arguably queered in the spaces of the MCC (Browne 2010). Religious practices unique to the LGBT Christians unsettle the heteronormative containment of Christian practice. This is particularly evident in the ritual of communion, where Brumbaugh (2007) concentrates her thesis of the transformative power of communion in the MCC. Both Wilcox (2003) and Lukenbill (2005) describe how discourse is changed through

the use of ritual and liturgy, including gender-inclusive language. In this study I demonstrate how group spaces, practices and ritual are unequivocally effective and empowering for many of the LGBT Christians.

For many of the participants the safe 'queer' space of the MCC is healing and nurtures a sense of belonging. According to Wise, Harris and Watts (2005), the sense of belonging is critical to the building of a new religious habitus. The space is queer in that it disrupts the heteronormative constraints that exist in most Christians spaces. Ritual, in particular communion, is also 'queered' and is effective in legitimating non-normative sexuality within the Christian sphere. Individuals report the importance of this space and ritual for acceptance and legitimation as Christians, in front of God.

On the other hand, there is strong evidence that the MCC spaces are limited in the 'queering', that this is irregular, inconsistent and at times, resisted. In some respects the MCC congregations remain steadfastly within normative Christian boundaries. Unresolved tensions are prominent in the MCC, in particular between the role of men and women. This is more pronounced in older congregations where patriarchal practices are reproduced and overtly supported by both men and women. Gender-inclusive language, for example, often causes discomfort, and is deemed by some as unnecessary, evidence of the inertia of traditional Christian habitus. Gendered distinctions are reproduced in three of the four congregations, despite the reflexive desire to be inclusive. Often the inclusivity is a patriarchal 'duty of care' in which lesbians are either understood to be in need of appeasing, or are pathologised for responding with less than feminine composure.

From its inception, however, the MCC has been reflexive about these tensions. There is tension centring on bisexuality and transgenderism, both of which unsettle the normative

order. The response to bisexuality in the MCC is indicative of the continual tension between the queer transgressing of normative boundaries through religious practice and liturgy, and the upholding of normative Christian order. Bisexuality challenges the 'homonormative' essential understanding of sexuality. The knowledge that 'God made me this way' is central to the legitimization of self, critical to a change of religious habitus. Bisexuality also appears to violate Christian values such as the monogamous family and structured faithful relationships. My observations support the criticisms that have been aimed at the MCC by bisexual ministers, that the MCC reproduces traditional binary ways of being.

This finding is in concordance with the findings of Dinnie and Browne (2011) who conclude that sexual fluidity is an unsustainable position in the heteronormative environment of a new-age religious group. This does not take away from the unique contribution to the lives of LGBT Christians that the MCC has made worldwide. The denomination is also in a process of reflexive interrogation of the extent to which it demonstrates the 'dynamic inclusive love of Jesus' (Shore-Goss 2013). Bohache (2013) for example, a minister in the MCC, questions the extent of 'queering of the MCC' in his article 'Unzipping church: Is there room for everyone?'

Theoretical Implications

I have argued that the religious experience is fundamentally relational and emotional, and that theology informs but does not drive participation in religious practice, nor does it drive resolution of internal conflict. This is highlighted by the experiences of the LGBT Christians in this study. Moving away from cognitive theoretical understandings of religion is important for two reasons. First, the religious experience is fundamental to the sense of self, and understanding this can aid in explaining the contemporary polarised forms of religious

expression. The rise of fundamentalism is having marked effects on world affairs (Emerson and Hartman 2006). Christian fundamentalism, for example, is influencing political decision making, most obviously in the USA and Australia. This is highlighted by emotional debates surrounding abortion and same-sex marriage (Holpuch 2015). Islamic fundamentalism is creating divisive tensions worldwide, the most recent example being the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Emerson and Hartman 2006; Vela 2015) and the accompanying humanitarian crisis.

The religious experience is embedded in culture, experience and emotion. Rather than looking at cognitive responses to belief, it is necessary to look at the complex contextual, relational and emotional factors behind religiously rooted conflict. Emotion as a factor in relationships within the religious field has often been ignored (Ahmed 2004). This has enabled hierarchical relationships based on emotion to remain unchanged. The nature of emotion within religion, in this case, is entwined with the political.

Second, it is necessary to understand the nature of the religious experience as enculturated to enable transformation of self and the transformation of social morality. This is demonstrated by the rise of individualised expressions of spirituality and religion. The traditional religious habitus clashes with the individualised need for self-expression and authenticity within the religious field. Religious habitus can be transformed but this is a complex relational and practical process. Emotions and relationships are central to creating and transforming the religious experience.

As has been illustrated in this thesis, change of religious worldview and habitus is far from simple. Habitus is embodied and is the basis upon which an individual builds 'horizons of significance'. It is upon these that moral judgements are drawn, and actions are based. It is

also through actions and through relationships that the moral ‘horizons of significance’ can be altered. This is an uncomfortable phase, where morality is contested. Critics of Taylor such as Noumena (2007) have suggested that ‘horizons of significance’, being necessarily based on ‘demands that come from beyond our own desires...from history, tradition, society, nature or God’ (Taylor 1991: 58), preclude personal agency and social change. He argues that such external demands often go hand in hand with oppression. I have proposed that change can happen as habitus is altered. Habitus is altered over time through relationships, practices, cognitions and emotions. Individuals exercise personal agency and resist oppressive constraints, but this is not a revolution. It is a negotiation as in this study, the LGBT Christians ‘mingle cultural norms with personal agency’ (Rappaport 2000: 11).

Suggestions for Future Research

This qualitative study drew upon the experiences of the 28 interview participants and my own observation and participation within four congregations of the Metropolitan Community Church in Melbourne and Sydney, Australia. The empirical and theoretical insights, while drawn from the narrow intersection of non-normative active Christians, are illustrative of wider patterns of social experience, especially in understanding the nature of the religious experience (Rice and Ezzy 1999: 43). Empirically, this study added to the small amount of research conducted in this geographical region, and to the growing body of research worldwide.

There were gaps in the sample. First, all but two participants belonged to congregations that were LGBT affirming. Thus their experience was not necessarily representative of the general population of LGBT Christians, many of whom remain within mainstream congregations. For LGBT Christians in the MCC the environment – the feeling of ‘coming

home' – is critical to their continued faith and legitimization of their sexuality. Those in mainstream churches may not have the same nurturing environment within which to express their faith. Cadge (2005) and O' Brien (2007) both investigate why LGBT Christians remain in mainstream congregations and how they manage identity conflict. The strategy of framing their journey of exclusion and suffering as meaningful is shared with those in MCC congregations. However, further comparative studies would be of interest to understand the different group dynamics and transformational experiences of those in less affirming congregations.

Second there were no interview participants among the sample from a Catholic background. Further studies of LGBT religious individuals from varied backgrounds and in varying congregations would aid in understanding more fully and broadly the experience of this social group. Although Yip (1997b) for example, has mainly concentrated on those of Catholic faith in Europe, further comparative studies would be useful to gauge the relative importance of theology, community and practices between these denominations.

Finally qualitative research enables a deep, rich and nuanced understanding of social processes. It cannot, however, be generalised to the larger population of LGBT Christians. Further quantitative research could be undertaken in order to gauge more general social patterns of this social group. This research can add to an understanding of the lived experience of religion, not only in the field of sexuality and gender.

Conclusions

This thesis is unique in that it analyses the experience of LGBT Christians using Taylor's (1991) concept of the 'ethics of authenticity'. It has argued that religiosity drives the desire

of these individuals to exert agency and live an authentic life that encompasses sexuality, gender and religiosity. This research indicates that this is accomplished by living according to moral mandates that are based upon horizons of significance that give meaning beyond the self. This thesis also further develops the theory of religion in its detailed analysis of the process of transformation of religious habitus. The use of Ahmed's (2004) theory of emotion and Butler's (1990) concept of performativity in conjunction with Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus is innovative. By focusing on individuals' personal experiences as they struggle with integration of separate aspects of identity, I have shown the critical importance of emotion, relationships and iterative practices to transformation of identity.

The thesis also demonstrates the importance of the safe spaces of the MCC which enable and empower individuals. Within the safe spaces of the MCC, a new religious habitus is forged. Finally this thesis has identified the tensions between Christianity and 'queer'. As individuals enact queer Christian practices, and strive to express the 'true' authentic self, spaces are queered. Yet the queering is constrained within clear Christian normative boundaries. The LGBT Christians in this study and the spaces of the MCC remain in permanent tension, as there is fundamental theoretical discord between 'queer' and 'Christianity'.

The lives of LGBT Christians matter. Through detailing the aspirations and struggles of these individuals to live authentic lives, true to their sexuality, gender and religion, I hope to unsettle the walls of prejudice, promoting acceptance, both within the wider LGBTIQ community and the religious community. This is important to counteract the social exclusion many LGBT Christians feel, and to change the perception that belonging to the LGBT community excludes the possibility of being Christian. The 'messiness of real life' (Yip

2010: 45), is 'outed'. The importance of such documentation cannot be underestimated, as it is only through exposure to the 'Other' that perception can be changed.

The lived experience of religion is complex, individualised and unique. Each individual provides insights into the nature of the religious experience. Although this is a small detailed study, the processes observed are useful to develop theoretical understandings of the nature of religion and transformation. According to Possamai (2015), the 'relationship between belief and social practice is rarely theorised from an empirical basis'. This thesis provides an empirical basis to begin such theorisation.

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Appendix 1: Information Sheet

Queering Christianity?: the negotiation of religious and sexual identity among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender attendees of four church congregations in Australia.

We would like to invite you to participate in the following study, which is being conducted by the student researcher, Bronwyn Moore in partial fulfilment of a PhD under the supervision of Dr Kristin Natalier and Associate Professor Douglas Ezzy, at the University of Tasmania.

What is the study about?

This main aim of this study is to explore the lived experience of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals (LGB) who attend Christian churches in Australia. We are interested in your story, your life. We want to know, for example, what it means to you to be Christian, what God means to you, how you have negotiated your sexual and religious identities, how you experience ritual and how important your congregation is to you.

Why have I been invited to participate?

We would like to talk to LGB Christians over the age of eighteen who are attending and actively involved in their congregation. You may have heard of this study from your friends, or you may have responded to an advertisement. We are interviewing members of your church and as you have indicated interest, you are receiving this information sheet

What's involved if I agree to participate?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to agree to an interview with Bronwyn. This interview will take place at convenient location for you, and should take between one and one and a half hours. If you agree, the interview will be digitally recorded on an iPod and later transcribed as a document. If you do not wish the interview to be recorded, with your permission, Bronwyn will take notes during the interview. We'd like you to share your experiences and opinions with us – the questions are not the type where you simply answer with a "yes" or "no", and there are no right and wrong answers. After the interview Bronwyn will send you a transcript and then phone you at a later date to address any questions you have, or to get any advice on any parts of the interview she is unclear about or that you wish to clarify. It may take up to a week to send through the transcript. If you agree she will call you in the week following the receipt of your transcript.

Are there any possible benefits from participation in this study?

You may feel this is a welcome opportunity to share your unique experiences. Through this study we hope to make your voice heard, and to gain a deeper understanding of the issues you face and deal with in daily life. By contributing you will help dispel myths and misunderstandings that exist around this issue, thus countering ignorance, both within the religious community and the community at large, as well as the secular LGBTQ community.

Will there be any risk?

Every effort will be made to conduct the interview with sensitivity, however, there may be topics covered that may cause you some emotional distress. If this does happen Bronwyn will give you the opportunity to stop discussing that topic or consider stopping the interview altogether. Should you wish to get in touch with any counsellors and support services, a list with contact numbers is attached to this Information Sheet.

Will the interview be confidential?

Every effort will be made to maintain your anonymity and confidentiality. The interviews will be taped and personally transcribed by Bronwyn, then coded with a pseudonym. This ascribed name will be used for

identification purposes in the analysis and the presentation of data. The codes linking the ascribed and actual names will be destroyed once we have clarified anything we are unsure about in the transcript. In the write up of the report, **anything** that identifies you will not be referred in the report and comments will only be made in very general terms. We will avoid using any unique or rare characteristics that might identify you to other people in your immediate or wider community. At any time you may ask for information that you believe may identify you to be deleted from the transcript.

All data will be kept securely and confidentially. The transcription of interviews will be done in Bronwyn's private university office. Only she and the chief investigator will have access to the recordings and transcripts, both of which will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password protected computer during the term of the study. Personal details will be kept on a password protected hard drive, and in a separate locked filing cabinet and destroyed as soon as all interviews are complete and all data is transcribed and any queries about meaning clarified. Both primary and aggregated data will be kept for a period of five years on a password protected hard drive in the Office of the Chief Investigator, after which they will be destroyed. Similarly, consent forms will be kept for a period of five years in the Office of Sociology in Launceston after which they will be destroyed.

Am I able to refuse or withdraw at any time?

Participation in the research is voluntary and you can choose to stop the interview at any time without giving a reason. You can also refuse to answer specific questions. Once you have checked the transcript, you can withdraw particular information from the transcript or your entire transcript at any time. This will be possible up till the results of the study are published. If you wish to do so, please inform me. You are under no obligation to take part in this study, and your decision to participate or not will not impact upon your position and experiences in the congregation.

Who can I contact to talk about the project?

If you are interested in taking part in the study, or just want to know more about it, please contact Bronwyn Moore by phone on 0438 359565 or email bjmoore@utas.edu.au. You are also welcome to contact Dr Natalier by email (Kristin.natalier@utas.edu.au) or phone on 03 6324 3370 or Dr Doug Ezzy by email (Douglas.Ezzy@utas.edu.au) or by phone on 03 6226 2330 to ask for further information about the study.

This study has been approved by the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have concerns or complaints about the conduct of this study, please contact the Executive Officer of the HREC (Tasmania) Network on (03) 6226 7479 or email human.ethics@utas.edu.au. The Executive Officer is the person nominated to receive complaints from research participants. Please quote ethics reference number **H0012415**.

How do I find out the results of the research?

If, at the time of the interview, you indicate your interest in receiving a summary report of the study, I will send one as soon as the study is complete. It is anticipated this will be in early 2014. This information sheet is yours to keep. You will also be provided with a copy of the consent form, should you agree to participate in the study.

Thank you for taking the time to read about this project.

Bronwyn Moore PhD Candidate (School of sociology and Social Work, University of Tasmania)

Appendix 2: Statement of Informed Consent

Queering Christianity?: the negotiation of religious and sexual identity among lesbian, gay and bisexual attendees of two church congregations in Australia.

1. I agree to take part in the research study named above.
2. I have read and understood the Information Sheet for this study.
3. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
4. I understand that the study involves an interview of approximately one to one and a half hours. This interview will focus on my experiences in negotiating my identity as a LGB Christian. If I agree, the interview will be digitally recorded and later transcribed in full. I will be given the opportunity to review transcripts and to withdraw any statement I have made at any time.
5. I understand that participation involves the risk that I may feel embarrassed or experience some emotional discomfort or distress when talking about my experiences. I understand that should this happen the researcher may stop the interview and ask if I would like to end the session or reschedule the session. I will also be directed to relevant support services.
6. I understand that all research data will be securely stored on the University of Tasmania premises for five years from the publication of the study results, and will then be destroyed.
7. I understand that the researcher(s) will maintain confidentiality and that any information I supply to the researcher(s) will be used only for the purposes of the research.
8. I agree that research data gathered from me for the study may be published provided I cannot be identified as a participant.
9. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without any effect. If I so wish, I may request that any data I have supplied be withdrawn from the research. This will be possible up until the results of the research are published. I am under no obligation to take part in this study and refusing to take part or withdrawing at any time will not affect my use of any services offered by any organization.
10. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

Participant's name: _____

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

Statement by Investigator

☐ I have explained the project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

If the Investigator has not had an opportunity to talk to participants prior to them participating, the following must be ticked.

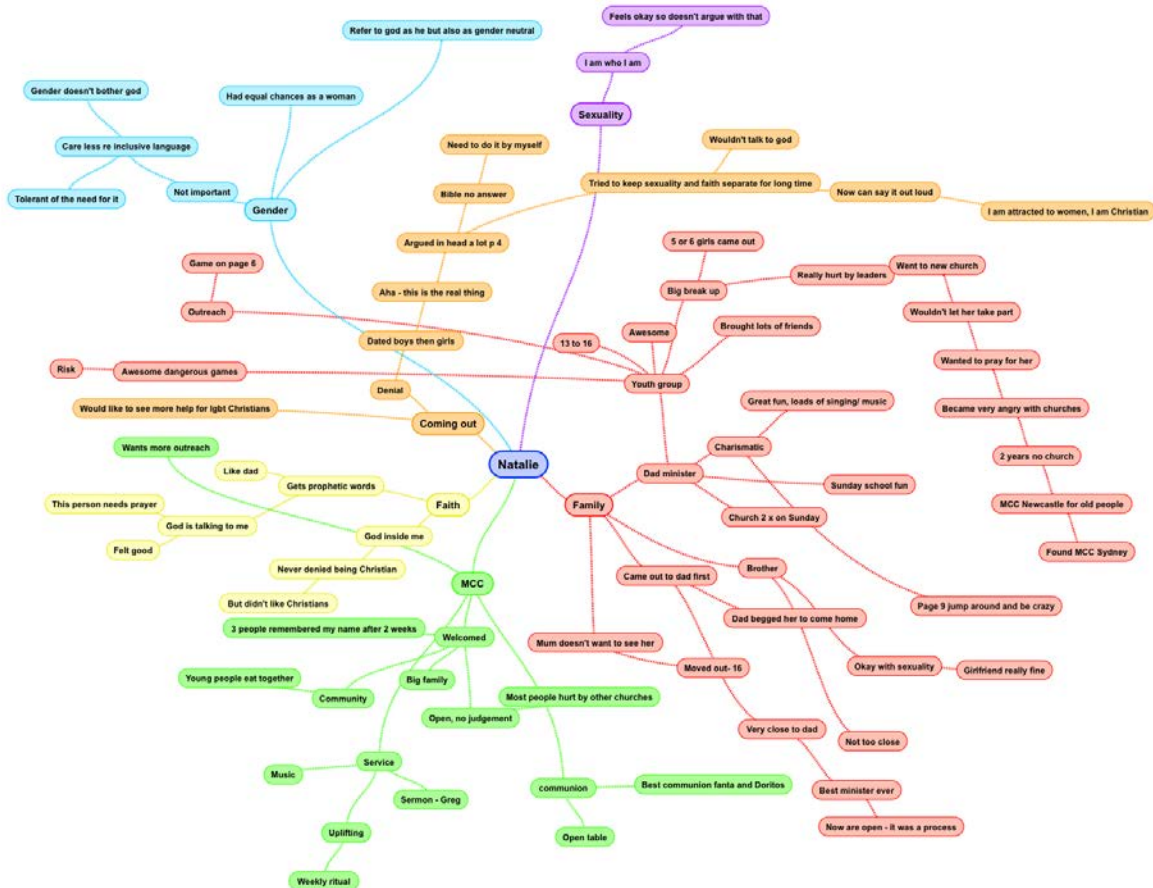
☐ The participant has received the Information Sheet where my details have been provided so participants have had the opportunity to contact me prior to consenting to participate in this project.

Investigator's name: _____

Investigator's signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 3: Sample Mind Map



Appendix 4: Recruitment Flyer

Are You Christian?

Do you identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual?

Would you like to tell your story?

If this is you, you may want to take part in our study on your experiences as a LGBT Christian. We are interested in your story, your life. We want to know how you feel, for example, what it means to you to be Christian, what God means to you, how you experience ritual, how important your congregation is to you. We'd like you to share your experiences and opinions with us. There are no right and wrong answers.

Such questions form the basis of a research project being conducted by Bronwyn Moore from the University of Tasmania, School of Sociology and Social Work as part of her PhD studies. You could be a participant in this research, aimed at increasing knowledge and understanding of you and your community, at helping break down barriers of misunderstanding and ignorance.

You only need to be over 18, to be actively participating in a Christian congregation and to be willing to share about yourself.

The study involves meeting Bronwyn for up to an hour and a half to talk about your experiences. Whatever you say will not be individually identifiable and all details will be confidential. Your decision to participate or not will not impact upon your position and experiences in the congregation.

If you are curious or may be interested in participating, please phone Bronwyn on 03 6324 3025 or email bjmoore@utas.edu.au. She will send you an information sheet outlining in detail all about the study. You may change your mind at any time. There is no obligation to participate.



Appendix 5: Interview Schedule

How do people of alternate sexualities negotiate their sexual and religious identities, and to what degree are they successful?

- Background religious experience
- Background attitude to homosexuality – self, family, church, community
- How do you feel regarding your sexual and religious self?
- If so when did this conflict become apparent? - How did/do you experience this conflict? – How did this impact upon your life?
- How do you feel at this stage in your life regarding this matter?

What is nature of the processes involved in identity negotiation and the role of ritual in this process?

- Can you identify any elements that have contributed to your resolving any conflict?- do you feel it is a process or does it happen suddenly?
- How has the congregation, family, friends, contributed to your efforts at resolving this conflict?
- How important is theology for you? , Bible study? the social and political activities?
- What are for you, the most important aspects/rituals of the service for you? In what way is this aspect/ritual valuable for you? For example, do you feel empowered? Close to god, close to others, cleansed?
- How, if at all, has ritual aided in this process of conflict resolution?
- In what way, if at all, does ritual affect your sense of self?
- Tell me about your coming out experience? Has the church community helped you in this process?

Is the religious experience of gay men and lesbians gendered, and if so, how does gender shape their religious experience?

- Can you tell me how you experience the MCC and God as a woman/man?
- Does your gender in any way shape your experience of God/Christianity? MCC?
- Does it shape the nature of your past/present identity conflicts?

How, if at all, do the participants experience heteronormative and patriarchal relations within the religious institution they attend?

- Can you tell me about the MCC- why you attend, core values, and to what degree you feel it represents your values, your interests?
- How important is your relationship with the pastor? Does he/she represent your interests?
- In what way does the gender of the pastor have an effect on you and your relationship to the church? God?

Appendix 6: Process of Conflict Resolution According to Levy and Reeves (2011)



Source: Levy, Denise and Reeves, Patricia (2011: 58) Resolving Identity Conflict: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer

Individuals with a Christian Upbringing. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, 23(1): 53–68.

Appendix 7: Bible Quotes that Condemn Homosexuality

Genesis 1: 23 – 24.

Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Genesis 19:1-8

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening; and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed himself with his face to the earth, and said, ‘My lords, turn aside, I pray you, to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise up early and go on your way’. They said, ‘No; we will spend the night in the street’. But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house and they called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them’. Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ‘Behold, I have two daughters who have not known man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof’.

Leviticus 18:22, 20:13

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them

Romans 1:24-27

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, ...Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were

consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (Letter of Paul)

1 Corinthians 6:9

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts. (Letter of Paul)

1 Timothy 1:10

...immoral persons, sodomites, kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted. (Letter of Paul)

Source: *The Bible, Revised Standard Version* (1962) Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company.